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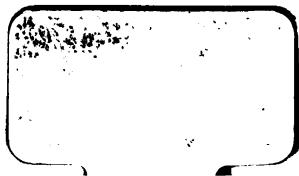
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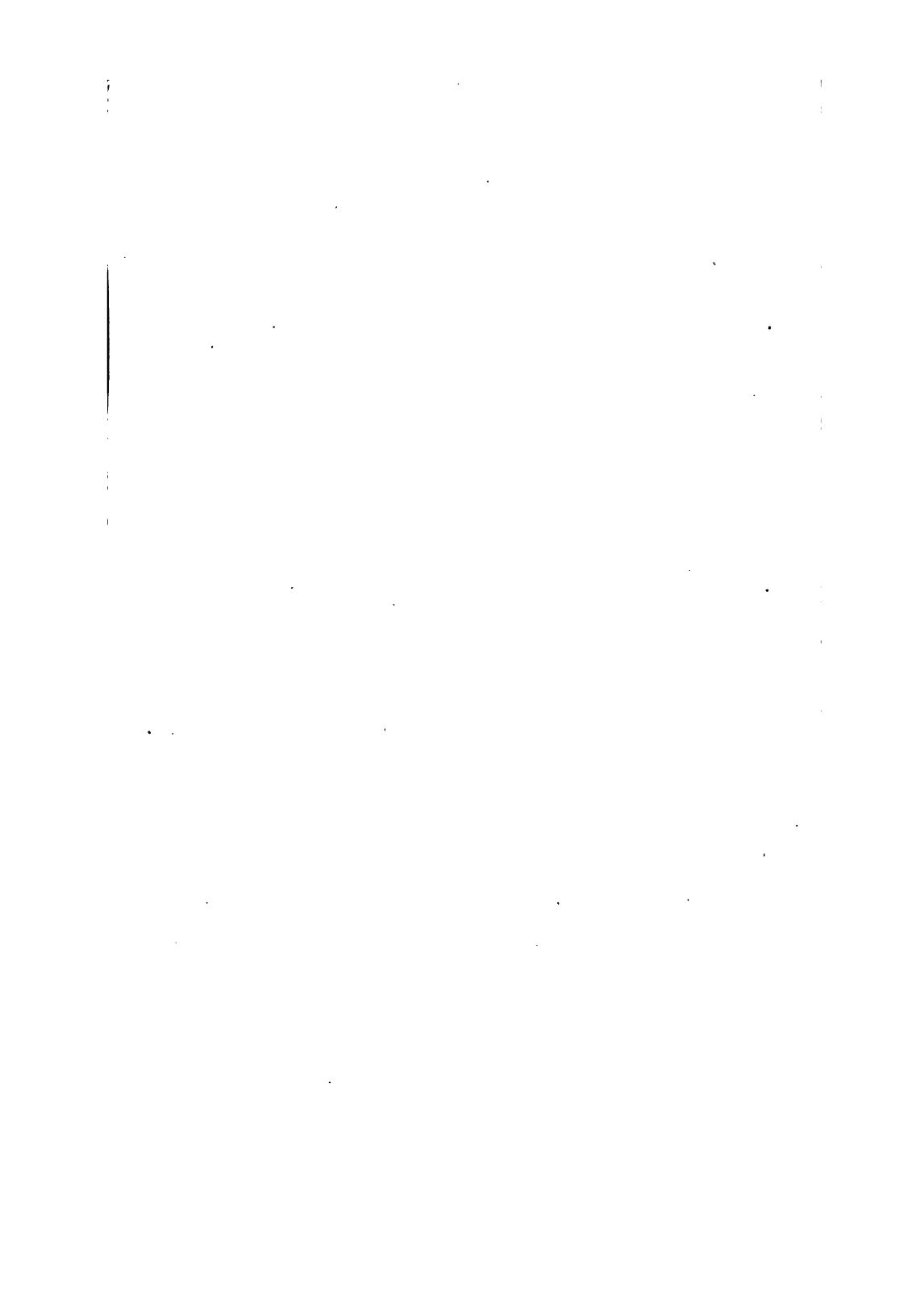
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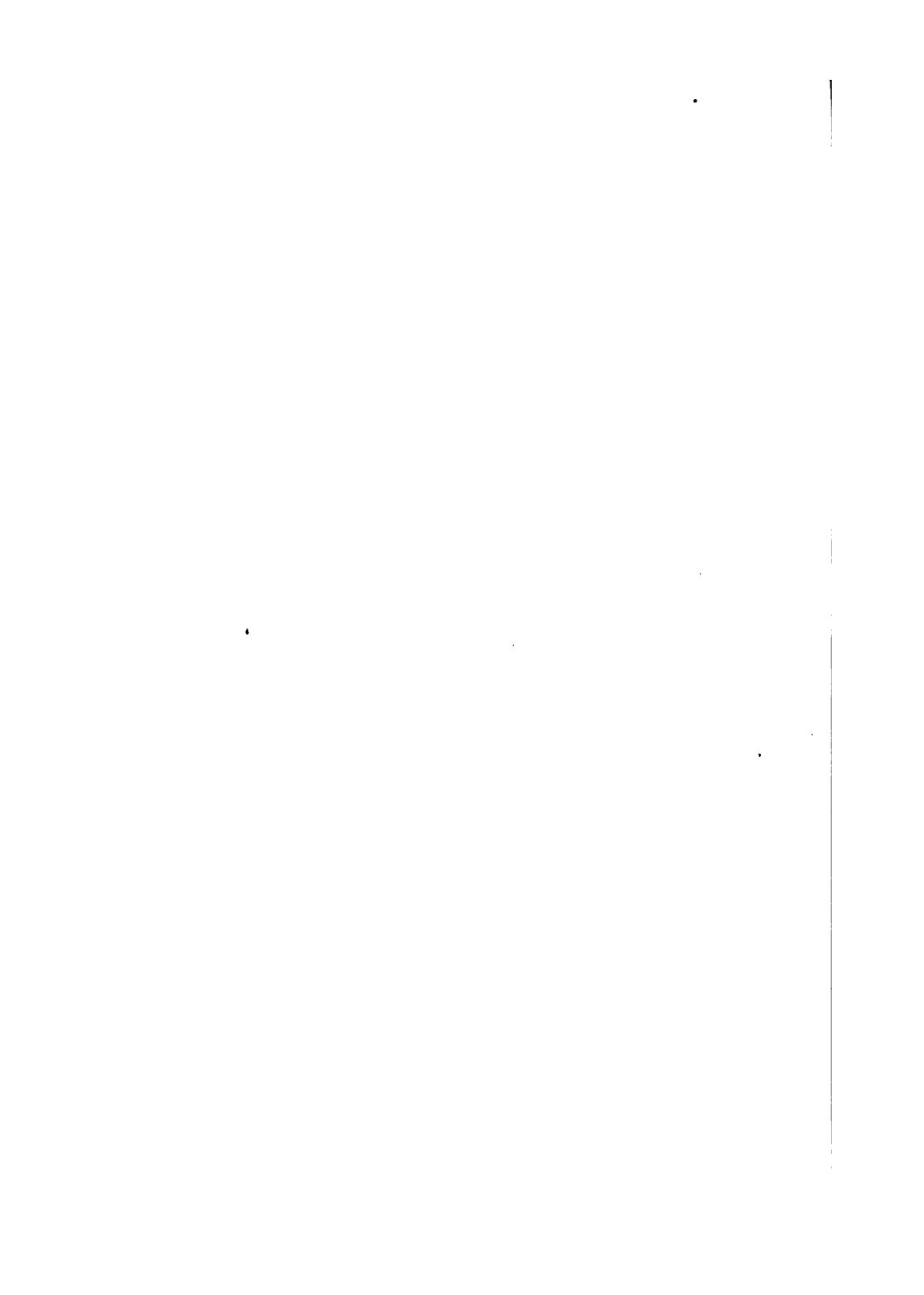
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THE HAMMONDS OF HOLYCROSS.

VOL. III.



THE HAMMONDS OF HOLYCROSS.

BY

LADY BLAKE,

AUTHOR OF

"MY STEP-FATHER'S HOME,"

ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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THE HAMMONDS OF HOLYCROSS.

CHAPTER I.

HILST the clouds thus cleared away between Stephen Palmer and his betrothed, there arose about that time a small one in the horizon of Lillian's domestic happiness and future comfort. It took no larger form at first than the shape of a letter from the West Indies, which appeared to engross much of Michael's as well as of her husband's consideration.

It was quickly followed by others of the same description ; and many were the consultations they gave rise to at Holycross House.

Lillian was aware that the Hammond family were large West Indian proprietors, and had frequently heard Mr. Hammond express his dissatisfaction at the unsatisfactory nature of all possessions in that part of the world ; but she did not apprehend that Gabriel had any particular interest in the property, except as it might concern his brother.

It was about a month after Lillian had first observed the engrossing nature of these communications, that Gabriel came into her room one morning whilst she was playing with her boy. He stood silently watching her for some time, then

surprised her by coming up and seating himself on the sofa by her, and abruptly asking—

“Lillian, darling, can you spare me for a few weeks?—would it grieve you very much to part with me for a little time?”

“What can you be thinking of, Gabriel?” asked Lillian, in blank astonishment; “if you are going anywhere, surely you will take me and Willie with you?”

“That could not be, dearest,” answered her husband; “though you may be sure I should wish it as much as you can possibly do. If I go at all, it must be alone, for it is entirely on a matter of business, relating, as you may probably guess, to these tiresome West Indian affairs, which have lately worried

and perplexed my brother so much, both on his own account, and that of others to whom he is responsible. He has had very unsatisfactory information respecting some of his agents there, which makes it absolutely necessary that some competent and confidential person should go over without delay, and investigate the whole affair."

"Then surely," exclaimed Lillian, impetuously, "Stephen Palmer may be sent there as well as you; he is more a man of business than you, and he has neither wife nor child at home?"

"No," replied Gabriel, "we can hardly expect such an act of self-denial from Stephen, in the present state of his affairs; he would not like to leave Clara in their peculiar position, and now everything is

arranged for their marriage to take place in a few weeks; we must not think of him, dearest!"

"Then why cannot Mr. Hammond go himself?—he is the person most concerned in the matter, and neither has nor expects to have a wife," remonstrated Lilian.

"That would never do," answered her husband, decidedly; "and I think, on consideration, you could not desire it. I know I would not have my brother run such a risk for worlds! After his late illness, and having suffered from fever so severely as he has done, he must never be exposed to the risk of a West Indian climate; it is not with him like a younger man. No, dearest, I have thought of and considered everything; the task



must devolve upon me, and me alone. And, after all," he added, cheerfully, "it is not such a great undertaking. It will only involve a few weeks' separation, and, with God's blessing, I shall soon see you again. You may depend upon my making all the dispatch that is compatible with the fulfilment of the duties of my mission. Come, now,"—seeing poor Lillian was unable to reply for tears,—“indeed, my darling, it is not worth making ourselves so unhappy about it, we must be thankful that we can look forward to meeting again in the course of a few months, at most.”

Much more passed between the husband and wife to the same effect, and when Lillian had recovered from the consternation the first announcement caused her, and

saw Gabriel's mind was made up to do what he considered right and fitting on the occasion, then she also took courage, and looked her trouble steadily in the face without shrinking.

She was too unselfish long to oppose her husband's wishes and plans because they would bring sorrow to herself, whilst others were likely to reap so material a benefit from their execution, and she did not like to confess to him how much she dreaded being left without him at Holycross House. She therefore said nothing to increase the pain she knew he must feel in parting from her and his boy.

Gabriel had, with thoughtful kindness, delayed making the communication till he saw his way clearly, and everything was in a proper train for his almost immediate

departure. He felt the less time Lillian had to brood over the coming separation, the better; and he knew that when he was once gone, she would soon endeavour to turn her thoughts to the happy time of their re-union.

Stephen meanwhile was thankful the lot had not fallen upon himself, though at the same time he rather grudged his uncle Gabriel the importance with which, for the time, it invested him in Michael's eyes, as well as more substantial benefits which he feared might afterwards accrue to him if he brought the business in hand to a successful issue.

There were, however, too many important interests at home just then to engross his attention, or to allow of his running the risk of such an absence as Gabriel's.

He also feared to weaken his hold on Clara's affections by any separation from her prior to their marriage, whilst the postponement of that event, for a few months, was a thing, on various accounts, not to be for a moment thought of.

Michael was much pleased and gratified by Gabriel's determination to undertake this voyage and investigation himself, and with more than usual kindness and energy, begged and insisted on Lillian and his child being left in his house during his absence, promising to take every care of both ; whilst Gabriel felt assured they could be in no better hands, and willingly complied with his brother's request.

Mrs. Palmer experienced no satisfaction at this turn of affairs, but, like a wise woman,

she held her tongue, and kept her own counsel, for she felt that Michael expected her to show every kindness and consideration to Lillian during the time of her husband's absence; but she bitterly resented the almost affectionate interest which he appeared to take in his young sister-in-law and her boy, and apprehended that it might ripen into a permanent and lasting regard for both.

Lillian, though far from suspecting Mrs. Palmer's feelings towards her, endeavoured to overcome the sensation of uneasiness with which she looked forward to their long association together, and turned with relief to the genuine expression of sympathy and affection with which Clara sought to lighten her approaching sorrow.

There was another friend also, never far off,

who, although he said but little, yet was deeply observant of, and touched by, the sight of Lillian's grief in the anticipated parting from her husband ; whilst he admired the self-control with which she strove to suppress all outward demonstrations of her feelings.

" You will often see her," said Gabriel to this friend, " during the time that I am absent, for you understand her perhaps better than even my brother and Sybil ; and you won't mind talking to her about me and old times, and things that will interest her. She will be happy with Clara as long as she remains here, but after her marriage, and until her return to Elmswell, I fear my poor Lillian will be rather lonely. So, if you are still at the Lodge, I know you will come here often

and see her. I feel assured it will be a comfort, and then you will write me a line sometimes, and tell me how she looks?"

Henry Linwood readily gave the required promise in all its bearings; and he kept it,—for it suited him well to do so.

The evening previous to Gabriel's departure, an incident occurred which gave a new turn to Michael's thoughts, respecting a circumstance long since past, but never forgotten by him; and whilst it tended to exonerate his brother from his former suspicions, served to send them wandering in a new and not agreeable direction.

It happened that Mr. Hammond was examining some papers in his private room

—on West Indian business—when Gabriel entered ; he came to receive his farewell instructions, an early hour the next morning being appointed for his leaving home.

Michael appeared annoyed, as he said he had been fruitlessly occupied in hunting for a missing paper, which formed a link between those on the table before him, and would facilitate matters very much if found.

Gabriel looked at the dates of the letters his brother handed to him, and asked if the one he was seeking corresponded as to time.

“ Ah ! ” exclaimed his brother, “ that is it ! I placed all those, with others of the same period, in a deed chest in the strong closet.”

As the words passed Michael’s lips, an unpleasant recollection crossed his mind,

and he looked inquiringly into Gabriel's face. There was no answering shadow to be seen there—the open, candid brow remained unruffled, and he replied to his brother's gaze by saying quietly—

“Did you?—then had not you better look there at once, for I should like to have the paper to refer to?”

“Will you fetch it for me?” asked Michael, in a peculiar tone of voice.

“Certainly,” returned his brother, “if you will tell me where, and how to look for it.”

“What!” replied Michael abruptly, “have you forgotten the secret of that closet already?”

“You forget how many years have passed since you last showed me the interior of it, as well as the exact spot

where the key used to be deposited—somewhere in the oak bureau in your bedroom, brother, is it not?"

"Yes," returned Michael; "the key is in the same place where you last saw it—or," an irresistible impulse urged him to add, "put it."

"I put it nowhere," said Gabriel, with a half smile. "I was but a lad at the time, and you never suffered the key to leave your own hands. You have on other occasions, since that time, informed me that all your most important papers, with other valuable things, were contained in the iron closet, but that was my last sight of its contents."

"What! did you never think it necessary to take a further survey, during my long illness, when I am told I was so very bad?"

"Good Heavens!—no!" exclaimed Gabriel, a quick flush rising to his face at his brother's words of implied suspicion. "What can make you think or ask so strange a question, brother?"

"I only thought you might have considered it incumbent on you so to do," replied Michael, evasively. "I fancied some one had opened the door during my illness, and no one could have had a plea for such a proceeding except yourself. Then it was *not* you?" he inquired, looking fixedly at Gabriel.

"On my sacred honour, *no!*" he answered, solemnly, returning his brother's gaze as steadily. "I should have deemed it a breach of all brotherly confidence and manly honour so to have acted! Surely, brother, you cannot think so meanly of

me? Do you not believe me when I say that nothing could have induced me to take that opportunity of prying into your secret repositories?"

"I *do* believe you," exclaimed Michael, with a sort of sigh of relief. "It was only a foolish and passing thought of mine. There, please say no more about it!" he added, seeing that Gabriel was about to speak again. "I am not blaming or accusing you of anything; you would only have done so, I am aware, in case of necessity, and its being all right and proper. I am glad I was not quite as far gone as I suspected. How about this business?"

And Mr. Hammond continued to talk on about it, evidently with a view of stopping further questions on Gabriel's part, who,

although uneasy and dissatisfied, could gain no further clue to his brother's strange remarks. He was, however, obliged to be contented with perceiving that Michael's confidence and regard were, if possible, increased instead of being diminished by what had passed. He sought the paper himself which had led to the discussion, and, in so doing, showed his brother all things connected with the receptacle in which it was placed. The key, the lock, the secret spring in the bureau, were all submitted to Gabriel's investigation.

Nothing could be more cordial than the parting between the brothers that night. Michael wanted no further confirmation of Gabriel's words; he saw and felt how true and single-hearted he was, and had ever been; and though he for-

bore to throw further light upon the subject, he took leave of Gabriel with more than ordinary expressions of confidence and regard.

The kind farewell made Gabriel happy even in the midst of the pain he experienced in parting with his wife and child; but he felt assured his brother would prove a true and faithful guardian to the treasures he committed to his care. So with a brave heart he departed, to serve that brother's distant interests, and do his duty by him as best he could.

Thus Gabriel was gone, and Lillian was left behind in the old house to count the weary hours till his return; and dreary, indeed, were the days that immediately succeeded his departure to his poor wife. She was lonely and depressed, but struggled

against her sorrow. The evenings were drawing in, and she keenly felt the blank which his absence made in the family party ; she sorrowfully noted the vacant place which he was used to occupy, and her eyes filled with tears when she thought how long it would be before they would be gladdened with the beloved presence ; and her heart ached with longing to hear again the dear familiar tones of that voice which was in memory ever echoing in its silent recesses.

Poor Lillian ! the trial was hard, for it was the first separation from her husband, and she found herself (with the exception of Clara) isolated amongst those to whose care she had been consigned in his absence.

It is not to be wondered at that Lillian

found comfort and pleasure in the midst of this loneliness in the society of Gabriel's friend.

Henry Linwood kept his promise made in parting, and came often to see Lillian; nor did he fail to send Gabriel the report he had asked for. It was he, indeed, who alone could for some time arouse any interest in her pre-occupied mind; but he knew well how to recall the wandering thoughts, by entering with her into the subject of them, and talking of the beloved and absent husband; or, as frequently in conversing with her of her past times and scenes, and of her who had been so dear to them both; whilst recalling those associations familiar only to themselves. Thus Lillian learned to feel a satisfaction in Captain Lin-

wood's society that she had never experienced before, even in her girlish days.

After a time she began to recover her spirits, and count the weeks to Gabriel's return; and, in the meantime, her interest again revived in Clara's occupations and amusements at Elmswell Park.

Mrs. Palmer had already wearied of the repeated excursions there, and soon declined accompanying the two friends, who frequently spent the whole day, remaining till late. Indeed, it was not without reason that Mrs. Palmer at that time of the year excused herself from joining their party there, for the principal object of interest consisted in watching the progress of the new garden which Clara had persisted in making, and which was progressing very successfully under her own and

Lillian's superintendence; Stephen, meanwhile, frequently accompanying them, and looking on with a dreary sense of impending ruin, if Clara's extravagant propensities continued in full sway after as before her marriage.

Occasionally Captain Linwood would ride over to inspect progress, often bringing with him a plan or a drawing for some fresh and tasteful outlay in the new pleasure-ground, which never failed to delight the two friends, and to excite a proportionate amount of concealed anger in Stephen's mind; but he repressed all outward show of his displeasure, and contented himself with using every expedient to hasten the time of their marriage, when he should assume the reins of government at Elmswell Park, and Clara be obliged to defer to his authority,

and Captain Linwood's advice and interference be at an end for evermore.

The only thing that was now required, in order to fix the exact time for this happy consummation, was this signature of Mrs. Riccardo, which, as it appeared, was not so easily to be obtained.

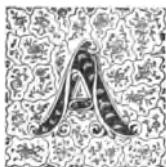
Stephen's lawyer was at length dispatched to Wimpole Street, and instructed not to leave without obtaining a sight of that lady, and desired to use every persuasive argument that could be urged to induce her to comply with his request; thus he felt assured he must soon succeed in the object nearest his heart.

A fresh disappointment, however, awaited the impatient lover, for he soon received the unpleasant tidings that Mr. and Mrs. Riccardo were gone abroad—they were making

a tour on the Continent. Stephen immediately went up to town himself to secure their address, or any other information that might be requisite. He had then the satisfaction of seeing Miss Fanny Newton, who was left in charge of the house, but unable to give him any intelligence relative to her cousin. She was equally in the dark as to their present place of destination, their time of absence, or probable return home.

She could only promise to let her friends at Holycross know when she heard anything of or from Mrs. Riccardo. Thus, until these tidings could be obtained, it became impossible to proceed any further in the matrimonial business; and there, to Stephen's intense annoyance, it rested meanwhile.

CHAPTER II.



BOUT this time Sir Arthur and Lady Stapleton arrived at Florence. They were glad to find, on taking up their temporary quarters at Schneiderff's Hotel, in the Lung' d'Arno, that the adjoining suite of apartments were just engaged by their cousin, Mrs. Beauclerc, who, with her mother, Lady Loraine, and her little girl, was travelling in the same direction as themselves.

Agnes was particularly pleased with this

meeting, as Helen Beauclerc was an especial friend of hers. She even extended her partiality to little Dora, though in general Lady Stapleton professed not to like children. (It may be observed, *en passant*, she had none of her own). It is not wonderful, however, that Agnes liked this mother and child, for Mrs. Beauclerc was a general favourite, and, as a near relative of her husband's, had become very intimate with her. There was a charm about Helen and her little girl that few cared to resist; and although the latter could boast no share of her mother's beauty, yet there was something so winning and natural about the child, that every one felt impressed in her favour.

With Lady Loraine the case was widely different; and she was not regarded with

much liking by Agnes, but, as Sir Arthur was very good-natured, she managed to appropriate a good deal of his time and attention, whenever they happened to meet.

Lady Loraine and her daughter were both widows, and the mother made very exacting demands upon Mrs. Beauclerc's constant society and attendance, wherever she might chance to go; for being very fanciful about her health, and perpetually moving about in search of a congenial climate, the claims she made on Helen's time might have exhausted the patience of a less cheerful, self-sacrificing person than her daughter.

Lady Loraine was happily unconscious that there was any greater pleasure or interest in existence than might be enjoyed in her service, she also hesitated in inflicting her company wherever she might consider it

desirable for herself so to do; thus in keeping Helen always with her, she found great advantages from the association, as well as pleasure and comfort to herself. On hearing, therefore, that her nephew and his wife were likely to pass some time at Florence, she turned her own steps in the same direction, with the intention of joining them there.

Agnes never allowed herself to be bored with any person or thing, except for some special purpose of her own, and always avoided, as much as possible, a *tête-à-tête* with Lady Loraine, leaving Sir Arthur to supply all deficiencies on her part, and amuse his aunt, without much assistance from herself. It happened that soon after their arrival at Florence, Lady Stapleton, having despatched the

courier of their letters, went out by herself, and, on her return, found Sir Arthur deeply engrossed with a letter he had just received. Having perused her own, she turned her attention to her husband's despatches, and seeing he looked annoyed, asked carelessly—

“What is the matter?—is the house at Stapleton burnt down, or has the steward absconded with all the rents?—I hope neither of the events has occurred?”

“Not quite so bad as that,” returned Sir Arthur; “but it is an unpleasant business notwithstanding.”

“Well, perhaps you will tell me the nature of it?” asked Lady Stapleton; quietly adding, “nothing is worse than suspense.”

“It is soon told,” said her husband—

"that beggarly little banker, Stephen Palmer, is determined to call in that mortgage which the Newton trustees hold on my property."

"He is a little horror!" replied Agnes; "but as we are obliged to acknowledge a kind of connection with them, you might make use of it, and write to him in a friendly sort of way, instead of making it a banking business proceeding; for as I hear, by a letter I have just received, he is going to marry that Miss Newton, it is more his affair than theirs. So just tell him it is inconvenient to pay off the money at present, and you would prefer leaving it as it now is, with his concurrence; and you can add something civil about friends and relations, if you like. A few words of that kind

go a great way with those sort of people, and do no real harm to those who make use of them."

"I thought of all that before, and have already written," returned Sir Arthur; "but I did not like to mention my letter to you, as I knew how you hated the connection, and had all but cut the man and his mother, which he, meanly enough, remembers now, depend upon it; although I thought you had made it up with the family since Lillian married into it."

"Ah!" interrupted Agnes, "that was only with Gabriel, whom I really like, as much for his own sake, now I know him, as for Lillian's. He has not got a bit of banker in his whole composition."

"Well, I fear that Mr. Palmer has plenty of it—he returns a very cool reply

in answer to my application and request, or whatever you may term it. There, you had better read what he says yourself. It is nothing but a business letter, and a business refusal. He takes no notice whatever of my friendly overtures."

"I see," replied his wife, returning the letter; "he seems quite glad of the opportunity of *disobliging* you. A narrow-minded, underbred person like him thinks only of having the upper hand for a time of one so infinitely his superior in every way. I have no doubt but that he is paying back some grudge for past slights; but it can't inconvenience you much, Arthur?"

"Indeed, I am sorry to say it will. I must apply to Gabriel—he is one of

the best fellows in the world—he will help me if he can."

"Poor Gabriel!" said Agnes, "he can do little enough at any time, and just now he is out of reach. I hear from Lillian that that stock of an old brother has sent him off to the West Indies on his affairs, leaving her, poor thing! to the tender mercies of the family party at Holycross House for the next three months or more; but what do you mean by its being inconvenient to pay off that mortgage? You can raise the money somewhere, if you haven't got it; and really with such an income as you have, it is nonsense to talk about being annoyed by such a trifle."

"Ah! it is very well to talk of my income," replied Sir Arthur with a sigh;

"but you know as well as I do, that what with one thing or another, I do not receive half as much as is reported. What with mortgages, and the girls' fortunes, and my mother's jointure——"

"That will return to you again," interrupted his wife.

"Ay, so it may, but not at present. Then you know what an expense we have been living at in London this last year ; and what with the new house and furniture, your diamonds resetting and adding to, and opera-box, &c.——"

"Pray stop!" said Lady Stapleton, coolly ; "you forget Newmarket and Epsom last year."

"Well," said her husband, who was really kind-hearted, "we will not quarrel about who has spent the most—

the money is gone, and I have had to borrow pretty largely. So you see——”

“ May I come in ? ” said a pleasant voice at the door of the Stapleton salon at that moment, and Mrs. Beauclerc entered. She said—

“ I fear I am interrupting your letters. I have only a message to deliver, and then I will take myself away.”

“ Oh ! no, not at all—pray come in ! ” her cousins called out together, neither of them sorry for the interruption.

“ Well, then,” said Helen, seating herself, and drawing her little girl, who had, as usual, accompanied her, close to her side, “ I met some friends of yours this morning at the Pitti Palace, and they—or rather the lady—gave me this card, and I am to tell you they will do you, or

themselves—I forget which—the honour of calling upon you this afternoon.”

Agnes took the card in silence, and read inscribed in writing on it—

“*La Comtesse Riccardo.*”

“I never heard of the woman before—who is she? What sort of looking person? Is she an Italian?”

“I should think not,” replied Mrs. Beauclerc, laughing. “She looks very English in every respect. Not so the gentleman who accompanied her; he is more doubtful in his appearance. So possibly the lady is some English acquaintance of yours, who has married a foreigner; and, had I not been informed by madame to the contrary, I should have taken her companion for her son, instead of her husband.”

"I am quite as much in the dark as ever," said Lady Stapleton.

"I will tell you all I know on the subject," returned her friend. "I went early this morning to the Pitti Palace, as I had promised my Dolly that I would take her to see the famous Madonna della Segiolla. You know what a fancy the darling has for pictures! Whilst we were there absorbed in admiration, we heard some one talking close behind us, and a gentleman remarking to his companion, 'That is the very gem of the collection. Pray observe it, my dear.' A lady's voice replied, 'Oh! that! What, in that plain frame? I don't see much to look at; and it's very clear they do not consider it what you say, or they would have treated it to handsomer

setting. I always think the frame is half the picture. I am sure, for one or two that I have bought, they have charged as much for one as the other.'

'That may be, *mon amie*; but just look.' And so when I moved on one side to make room for these connoisseurs, for the first time I saw the speakers. The lady was a portly, rather good-looking, but overdressed woman, a little past middle age, to say the least. The gentleman was also too fine for the occasion; and, despite of his having a handsome face, was decidedly *not* a perfect gentleman—either English or foreign. He seemed a mixture of both—more Jewish, perhaps, in his physiognomy than either Italian or German. Now do you recognise your friends?"

"Me! indeed, no! I am further off than ever," returned Agnes, with perfect truth. "They will find it is some mistake. But how came they to speak to you, or to hear anything of me?"

"I will tell you, *mia cara*. After I had made room for these people to see the picture, I continued to look also, and whilst so doing, a large party entered the room, and came up to the same point of attraction. Amongst them were several of my own acquaintances, and we were soon engaged in conversation. During this time the lady I have mentioned appeared to take a lively interest in all we happened to say or do, moving when we moved, remaining stationary when we did, keeping watch, meanwhile (as I fancied), on myself. At length she heard me addressed

by name, and no doubt she then communicated her discovery to her companion. The result of the conference was made apparent by the lady returning to the place where I was, taking a vacant seat by me, and observing, in a quiet, matter-of-fact manner, ‘I thought it must be you, Mrs. Beauclerc, by your little girl. I have seen you both, when you were at Stapleton, driving with Lady Stapleton in Holycross; and as she is, or will be, a relation of mine very soon, perhaps you will excuse the liberty I take in asking after her, and where she now is, as I hear she and Sir Arthur are somewhere on the Continent?’ What could I reply to this but by giving the information she required, which produced the message I have come to deliver; and

I only hope I have not committed some egregious blunder in so doing."

Agnes still looked, as she felt, entirely at fault, and replied—

"I have not the most remote idea still as to who my friends and relations may be; but as the lady's speech points to Holycross, I have great misgivings that these people may prove to be some of poor Lillian's connections. Oh! that most unfortunate marriage! What it has brought upon all of us!"

"In respect to Lillian's most charming husband—the good Gabriel, as I always call him," said Mrs. Beauclerc, who had often met them at Stapleton, "you need do nothing but rejoice at the connection; and really there is nothing so very objectionable in my new acquaintance at

the Pitti Palace. I only wish I could tell you more about her."

"Oh! mamma dear," said little Dora, who had been an attentive listener, "don't you remember the lady said something about Lady Stapleton not knowing her new name; and as she was lately married, she would write her old one on the back of the card?"

"There is a good little Dolly!" said her mother, fondly kissing her; "yes, you are quite right. Look, Agnes, at the back of the card—she did write something in pencil, as Dolly says. I remember it now—how stupid I am!"

"Yes," replied Agnes, "here it is written—late Mrs. Morris—*née* Newton."

"Well, I hope that is satisfactory," said Helen.

"Newton?" returned Agnes. "Ah, I recollect the name, Newton. Yes, that is the girl with the immense fortune, that Mr. Palmer, Gabriel's nephew, is about to marry. But who can this be?—not her mother, surely?"

"Oh! no," said Sir Arthur, coming up; "I know all about it now—it must be the aunt with whom this girl lived. I remember all about the Newtons for ages past."

"Well, that is more than I do," replied his wife, slightly raising her eyebrows.

"Then," said Sir Arthur, in continuation, "if this is the future Mrs. Palmer's aunt, it behoves us to be civil, as she may have it in her power to do good or evil in the matter which we were discussing when Helen came in."

CHAPTER III.

E may now look back a little upon the newly-wedded pair in Wimpole Street, and inquire into their motives and movements prior to their arrival at Florence.

The day before they left home, the signor placed a small packet of written cards (he was an economist in many small ways) in his wife's hands, which bore the address, "La Comtesse Riccardo," upon them. He further informed the astonished lady that her passport and lug-

gage would also bear the same inscription.

The *ci-devant* Mrs. Morris was not given to strong emotions of any kind, nevertheless she expressed much surprise at her new title, and asked how it came to pass she had never heard of the signor's rank before.

"Because, *mon amie*, it was hardly worth mentioning; but now we are going on the Continent, we shall find it a better travelling name; and, *vive la liberté*, surely I have a right to call myself by what name or title I please."

"If everybody did that," returned his wife, who was eminently prosaic and matter-of-fact, "it would cause great confusion, I think. Not that I object to a title if it is fairly come by, as I hope this is."

"Don't distress yourself, *ma mie*. I have every right to bear a title. Ours is a very *ancienne famille*; so old, the title is, as you may observe, almost worn out—what you would call obsolete."

"That's very odd," said the newly-ennobled lady, much mystified. "With us English the older the title the better; do you inherit yours from your father?"

"He never, I believe, claimed it *de tout*. No; he emigrated early, and became almost English; but we will not talk of him—he is no more. But I now go to claim my uncle's property and title in a foreign land—that is it. *Comprenez vous, ma chère*—do you understand?"

"Not at all, my dear signor," replied his wife, looking hopelessly bewildered.
"How came you never to mention a word

of all this before? I should have liked to have let them all know of your expectations when we were at Holycross. And Miss Clara, too; but come—now do tell me, Gustave dear, is it really true?"

"*C'est vrai, ma chère*—that is, I have told you. *Quant au reste*—it may be, or it may not be," replied her husband, candidly.

"But you are a signor, I suppose?" asked Madame la Comtesse, rather doubtfully; "and in that case I may as well be the signora in Italy, where we are going; it will sound just as well, and make us feel quite at home there."

"Never mind the signor, *ma mie*, we will be comte and comtesse at home and abroad in future. It will give us an easier *entrée* into society. And, I have told you,

we go to claim our rights; when we return, we have gained them. *Allons! cela suffit!*—surely that is enough for all inquiring friends who like to ask you why you are comtesse."

"Then I am really a countess, now and always?" asked Mrs. Riccardo, with a glimmering sense of importance dawning in her obtuse mind.

"*Pour toujours et toujours, ma vie!* and thus I salute thee, *ma belle Comtesse!*" returned her husband, suiting the action to the word, and thus sealing the patent of his wife's nobility upon her cheek.

He then immediately left the room, and she sat down in solitude to ponder over the newly-acquired dignity which had come upon her so unexpectedly.

Mrs. Morris, it may be observed, had

hitherto liked a quiet life, and had preferred her own ease and indulgence to every other consideration. She was not naturally ambitious, and had been well contented with the good things that had fallen to her lot—being anxious only to enjoy as much of them as she possibly could, in her own indolent way, and without much bodily or mental exertion. She now felt almost stunned by her husband's communication, though determined to dismiss at once all misgivings as to its reality. She therefore gave herself up to a species of self-glorification, in the exalted view she took of her new position. She only wished they had not settled to leave London on the following morning, as she should have enjoyed the triumph of going round to her particular friends, and declaring what had

befallen her in the way of honours ; and then she experienced a confused idea that the signor was going to claim his title and property, and could not therefore assume it until his return.

She wisely determined, on consideration, to do nothing rashly ; so, waiting a further conference with her lord, she contented herself with telling her confidential maid, Mrs. Jones, and her cousin Fanny Newton, of the expected good fortune which awaited her and the signor abroad, desiring them at the same time to address her henceforth as the Countess Riccardo. This piece of news was received in a very different spirit by her two auditors. The lady's-maid exulted in her mistress's communication, considering that her lady's mantle of honour would, in some degree, descend upon her own shoulders, and the

éclat of her title be reflected upon herself, and procure for her a greater degree of respect during her approaching travels.

Fanny Newton heard her cousin's story in silence, and made her own private comments thereupon. The new-made countess, however, rather resented this undemonstrative reception of her tale, and observed,

"Well, I think, Fanny, you might congratulate me and the signor."

"Certainly," said Fanny; "but you have taken me by surprise; I wonder we never heard anything before of his expectations."

"How could you hear anything before there was anything to hear? How could he tell his uncle was going to die—and—leave him a title—and—and perhaps a fortune?" she added, rather doubtfully.

"Well! I am sure I am indeed very

glad if there is a fortune too," said Fanny, cheerfully; "and then if there is a title coming, it will not be an empty one."

"You need not concern yourself about that," retorted her cousin. "If I am satisfied with what I have got, *you* need not complain of the signor's poverty. I am sure he is very generous and kind to you in every respect—I wonder you are not more glad to hear of his good fortune."

"So I shall be when I see it," said Fanny, for she had no wish to provoke or exasperate, and therefore avoided as much as possible all discussion of the subject which had been started.

It was very true that Fanny Newton had had no cause to deplore her cousin's unsuitable marriage, as far as she herself was concerned. Her position in the family

was much the same as before, and the signor always treated her with consideration and respect. She had no choice but to remain where she was, at least for the present. Clara, perhaps, might offer her a home when she removed to her new one; but as yet this was not done, and Fanny felt instinctively that Stephen Palmer was not the person to approve of his wife's having such an appendage as a poor cousin in his house. On the other hand, she found herself quite as necessary to her elder relation, since the change in her establishment, as she was before. It was evidently no part of the signor's policy to induce his wife to dispense with her companion. He had no objection to a third person in his domestic relations. He found Miss Newton quiet and useful; her presence was no *gène* to him; she

kept her cousin in good humour, and amused her when he was absent. These absences had of late become more frequent, and it was fully his intention that Madame should be accustomed by degrees to do without his constant society. He acceded to her wish (for it was his own also) of making a tour abroad that autumn. He encouraged her in the idea of her delicate health—it would form an excellent pretext for his keeping her at home on their return, and allowing him the benefit of such liberty as he would be able to enjoy whilst on their travels.

Fanny was, moreover, the very person on the present occasion to leave in charge of their *ménage* during their absence; and the length of it was to depend upon various contingencies when abroad. So that if the signor found it

answered, it would probably be prolonged, while, at the same time, other reasons might induce a speedy return. At all events, Fanny was desired, if any inquiries were made of her, to say she knew nothing of her cousin's movements or intentions; that Madame Riccardo was gone abroad for her health, and would not be long stationary anywhere.

These injunctions were given with a view of baffling any efforts the Holycross party might make, in order to ascertain where the signor and his lady were gone to, and to thwart all measures to procure the signature of the latter, as necessary to the completion of the settlements before alluded to.

“So mind, Fanny,” said Madame *en partant*, “you say you know nothing about us, which will be true, as I don’t

see any use in writing—it will only be a horrid trouble and expense—and Miss Clara must wait till I come back. It will be an excellent thing for her, to postpone such a marriage with that selfish, designing fellow, Stephen Palmer. He only wants her money—she will find that out sooner or later—girls are always in such a hurry to be married—or she would never have accepted him; but she has behaved in such an undutiful way to me, that I'll do nothing to help her one way or the other. So just say, when Mr. Stephen or his lawyer calls here, you know nothing about the time of our absence or our return, and that it all depends on my health."

With these words, the lady took her leave of her cousin and her home.

After a short time, Madame la Comtesse became so well accustomed to her new title, that she wondered she had ever doubted her right to assume it. A slight incident, however, occurred in reference to this circumstance.

The signor one day asked his wife if she remembered what had passed between them on her first accession to the dignity. Madame's recollections were never particularly well-defined, but she had a general idea as to the bearing of the case, and asserted as much.

"If I remember right, *ma mie*," said the signor, "you seemed to feel a delicate reluctance to assume a title, of the genuineness of which you wanted proof?"

"Well! you said your uncle, or cousin, or somebody, was dead; you then came

into it, and that was all plain enough," answered his wife, rather alarmed.

"Yes, I thought so; but upon making inquiries, I find another and a nearer pretendant to the title!"

"What! do you mean to say, then," said the lady, half-inclined to cry, "that I am not the countess any longer? Is that what you mean to tell me?"

"*C'est vrai, ma mie,* that is true; that is, *hélas!* what I mean!"

"Then I say it is very unkind of you ever to have made such a fool of me. And now everybody knows it—and Fanny has told Clara—and how they will laugh at me! Oh! I can't bear it!"

Here the much-wronged lady burst into tears; but after allowing her grief to continue for a short time, the signor attempted

to take her hand, which she pettishly withdrew.

“Permettez, ma mie, you are still a countess, if you will. You need not kill mon oncle to obtain what you wish.”

“What can you mean?” exclaimed madame, with a bright ray of hope rising in her heart; “tell me what you mean? —and pray do tell me the truth this time?”

“*Attendez, then,*” said the signor; and he proceeded to explain to her that the purchase of a certain property then to be sold, would, if made over to him, entitle him to bear without dispute, and in all good faith, the name and title she so earnestly coveted.

“But the money?” said the countess.

"Ah! I have not got it," returned the signor; "but *you* have—the whole affair is in your hands—I leave you to determine."

The wily signor then withdrew, and the struggle in his wife's mind was ere long decided, as he knew it would be. She consented to make over to him a considerable portion of her hitherto reserved property; and shortly after he told her she was the joint-possessor of a small estate, which owned a dilapidated chateau, and rejoiced in the name of "Schloss Rheinfeld."

"But," added her husband, "we will let the place, and remain as we have been hitherto known—the Comte and Comtesse Riccardo."

After this announcement, Madame's spirits began to regain their former tone, and she

endeavoured to forget at what a sacrifice she had obtained her restored peace of mind and assured rank. True it is, she mourned the loss of the money which had purchased it; and yet she would have more deeply sorrowed after the departure of her imagined importance in the vanishing of her title.

It is, however, more than probable that had the signor in the first instance proposed so great an outlay for the purchase of it, she would have resisted the temptation. Having been decoyed into its assumption, and having tasted the sweetness of the possession, she was willing, at any price, to obtain the right to its enjoyment.

CHAPTER IV.



HE course of their travels brought the Comte and Comtesse Riccardo to Florence about the same time that the Stapletons and Mrs. Beauclerc, with her mother, Lady Loraine, took up their abode there also.

Their locale was, however, at some distance, and it was not till Madame Riccardo saw Mrs. Beauclerc at the Pitti Palace, that she became aware of their being in the same place.

The signor and his wife had previously

passed some weeks at a German spa, where he persuaded her to remain, as a place likely to be very beneficial to her health ; and she, well-pleased with the signor's apparent anxiety on this point, was easily persuaded to do so. It was not a very lively life for the comtesse, as her husband enforced the advice of the doctor he made her consult, so affectionately and urgently, of keeping very early hours, that he made her go to bed at eight o'clock every night, and rise at the same hour in the morning ; then afterwards, attended by her maid, she made the tour of the baths and wells, till she declared herself to be almost washed away.

And what did the signor in the meantime ? Altogether, it was reported, he amused himself pretty well. He wiled

away his mornings with his many acquaintances in various ways; he drove, he rode, he talked, he walked, he flirted ; in the evening he danced, he sang, he played, he gambled—yes ; he was as often to be found at the *rouge-et-noir* table as anywhere else, after he had disposed of his ancient comtesse for the night.

She meanwhile, happily unsuspecting of her lord's misdemeanours, employed the little time she found to spare from her bathing and water-drinking avocations in making such acquaintances as the place and society then afforded. She found her new title availed her something, and facilitated her *entrée* into the same ; whilst her husband's agreeable qualities and other resources rendered them welcome additions to any parties of pleasure.

Still madame found her share of amusement much curtailed ; both her husband and her doctor concurring in the necessity for her considering her health more than her pleasure. Owing to this anxiety on the part of the signor, his wife's participation in the gaieties of the place was very circumscribed, and he was compelled to go out a great deal without her ; so much so, that amongst some of his principal friends and acquaintances the existence of madame la comtesse seemed to be totally ignored ; or, if partially recognised, a confused idea appeared to exist that she stood in the relation of mother, and not wife, to the charming Monsieur le Comte de Riccardo.

At last, however, madame's patience became exhausted. She declared she could

imbibe no more water, or submit to be soaked in it any longer. It was taking away all the strength out of her, and she was getting weaker instead of stronger ; and if they were to go to Italy at all, she would go at once. She was sick of water and watering-places.

The signor made a virtue of necessity, at least for the time being ; he was, in fact, for many reasons, as ready to depart as his lady. Some of his proceedings were getting talked about ; he was becoming a noted character in more ways than one, and he acceded with perfect readiness to madame's wish for a change of quarters. And thus it happened they came to Florence.

Madame Riccardo had seen Mrs. Beauclerc once or twice before she accosted her at the

Pitti Palace. She had made up her mind it was the pretty young widow she had seen in past years at Holycross. The little girl who accompanied her also served to settle her identity. She therefore lost no time in seizing the opportunity of introducing herself, and making the inquiries she felt doubly privileged to make after Lady Stapleton.

As Madame la Comtesse, the *ci-devant* Mrs. Morris, felt happily conscious of her improved social position, and the contemplated connection in their respective families (although apparently so much contemned by her at other times) was now readily acknowledged, and brought forward as a plea for introducing herself to Mrs. Beauclerc, and inquiring after her relations.

Helen Beauclerc was an essentially high-bred and refined woman—every look, every tone, proclaimed the fact. She had, nevertheless, so much real good-nature and innate kindness of heart, that she would not turn from the appeal thus unceremoniously made by the questionable-looking couple who claimed, through her, the acquaintance of her friend and cousin, Lady Stapleton.

The mention of Holycross was also sufficient to enlist her sympathies, for she knew Lillian and her husband well, and she was aware that the latter had relations, who, however estimable and worthy in their own position in life, did not rank highly in the consideration of her fastidious relative, Lady Stapleton. Her own appreciation, however, of Gabriel Hammond

was so genuine and sincere, that supposing the *soi-disant* countess to be some near relative of his, and Lillian's, she took the card tendered to her acceptance, with a promise of giving it as soon as she returned home; and, as we have seen, this promise was duly fulfilled.

In the course of the same afternoon, Monsieur and Madame de Riccardo did themselves the honour of calling upon Sir Arthur and Lady Stapleton. The reception they met with on the occasion was far more gracious than might have been expected, knowing the *hauteur* which Agnes in general exhibited to such unfortunates as presumed upon her acquaintance without being duly qualified to aspire to the honour.

The remarks, however, of her husband

had not been entirely without effect ; and although she exceedingly disliked the appearance both of Clara's aunt and her husband, she submitted to circumstances so far as to welcome them with tolerable cordiality, and recognized the claim made by madame upon the future connection with her sister's family.

Sir Arthur was even more friendly than his wife ; and the *ci-devant* Mrs. Morris was much pleased and gratified by his reminiscences of her family in his boyish days, and the expression of his hopes that the name of Newton would be again revived in the county, as he was glad to understand her niece was about to marry a connection of his wife's, or her sister's, which was the same thing ; and he heard that Mr. Newton

Palmer—as he was to be called—had purchased a fine place near Holycross, and he supposed that she, Madame Riccardo, would be often down in their neighbourhood, and hoped that she would come over to Stapleton Park. And with many such civil speeches did he continue to delight his listener.

Neither the Comte nor Comtesse was troubled with *mauvaise honte*, and both received all these unexpected civilities with perfect composure and self-possession. Madame, notwithstanding the obtuseness of her perceptions in general, soon found that they owed much of the consideration with which they were treated to the proposed connection between the families, and she proceeded to make the most of it, keeping all her distaste to it, and the

existing feud between them, entirely in the background.

In the midst of these civilities, Lady Loraine entered, accompanied by Mrs. Beauclerc and her little girl. Agnes felt rather ashamed of her visitors, and did not venture to introduce them to the exclusive Lady Loraine.

Helen Beauclerc, with ready courtesy relieved her cousin from her embarrassment by acknowledging both the lady and gentleman as her own acquaintance, and presenting them as such to her mother.

Lady Loraine saw at a glance they were not of *her* world—that was sufficient; for how much higher or lower they stood in the social scale, signified but little to her. Neither was she in the least afraid of deteriorating from her own high position

by any notice she might be pleased to bestow upon them, should she happen to be so inclined. She perceived, also, that for some reason best known to himself, her nephew seemed desirous of making the agreeable to the mismated pair then before her, so she seated herself with the amiable intention of forwarding his endeavours by adding the charm of her presence to the conference.

Lady Loraine's kindly condescending intentions met with their reward when least looked for. Whilst she leaned back in her fauteuil with languid toleration, and counting the minutes till the departure of these strange guests, her attention was suddenly caught and arrested by a communication that Madame was then in the act of making to Lady Stapleton. It was

relative to the life she had led at the Eaux de Kissingen; how she had imbibed and bathed in its healing fountains; what the medical men there had thought of her; and what benefit she had derived from their prescriptions and treatment.

To all this, and much more, did Agnes listen, or pretend to listen, with wearied and forced attention, when relief came from a quarter she little expected.

Lady Loraine's torpid interest was aroused; it was like the sound of the trumpet to the war-horse, or the blast of the horn to the hunter; she leaned forward, she recognised, beneath the portly and unpromising exterior of the *soi-disant* comtesse, a congenial spirit. She ventured upon a question or two, and seemed

deeply interested in the replies ; there was the free-masonry of valetudinarianism between them henceforth.

Moreover, it was to these very baths and waters that Lady Loraine had been at one time ordered herself ; though afterwards a change of medical advice, as well as her inclinations, had sent her elsewhere. It was therefore pleasant and refreshing to find a confirmed invalid like herself, such as Madame reported herself to be, just returned from thence, and willing and able to talk of the said waters and all the wonders they had wrought.

To Agnes's great relief, the course of Madame's eloquence was diverted into another channel, and ere long Lady Loraine was engrossed in a conversation of deeper interest

than any she had enjoyed since her arrival at Florence.

Whilst matters were thus favourably progressing on one side of the salon, the signor was not inactive on the other. After some exchange of civilities between himself and Sir Arthur and Lady Stapleton, he betook himself to the farther end of the apartment, examining the various pictures, &c., with the would-be air of a connoisseur.

Little Dora Beauclerc appeared to be sent to his aid, as she, also leaving the rest of the party, took up her station by the piano in a distant recess, and amused herself by turning over the variety of music scattered about, and looking at the illustrations with which many of them were adorned.

Whilst thus occupied, the signor, with a stealthy step, drew near. He was well versed in the various means of access by which a familiar footing might be gained, having successfully practised in the several families with whom he had become already acquainted.

He looked at the charming little child, and felt that Mrs. Beauclerc's most desirable intimacy might be approached through that quarter. He commenced with a series of interrogations as to Dora's knowledge of and love for music.

He met with ready and intelligent answers; the deep shady grey eyes looked up at him without shyness or reserve, and the quick smile and childish laugh responded easily to the attempts he made for her amusement.

He soon asked the little girl to play to him, and in an instant the piano was opened, Dora perched upon the music-stool, and her performance commenced. She never thought of refusing to play because she was not a musical proficient ; it was enough for her she could oblige anyone in so doing. She was entirely devoid of self-consciousness when required to please and to amuse others. She would dance, play, or sing if desired to do so, in the single, simple wish of giving pleasure. How she performed, and what others thought of her, she quite forgot to consider.

“I wish I could play it better !” said Dora, as she descended from her seat. “I will ask mamma when she has done talking to Uncle Arthur. You would like these Little Red Riding-hood quadrilles so

very much more then. Mamma got them because she said the picture of Little Red Riding-hood was like me, but I don't know them quite yet."

"Shall I play them to you?" asked the signor. "Mamma seems engaged, and I will do my best."

"Oh! yes; I did not know you could play!" exclaimed the child delighted.

It may be supposed her pleasure increased with the performance. It was, in fact, so good of its kind, that ere long it attracted the attention of the elder members of the party, and all, except the two invalid ladies, drew round the centre of attraction.

The signor displayed his musical talents very cleverly, but, with much tact, suiting his composition to his young acquaintance,

and playing on, as if for her amusement alone. He improvised a species of dramatic entertainment, taking the airs of the quadrilles before him as the theme or basis, and giving with much animation the history of Little Red Riding-hood, with all the details of which he appeared to be as well acquainted as his young auditor; nor did he stop or falter in his performance till he had brought that veritable story to its affecting and tragical conclusion.

“Poor little Dolly! she looks quite overcome,” said Mrs. Beauclerc, laughing; “and I think we are all as much charmed with the entertainment as she is. You have given us quite a delightful opera of little Red Ridinghood!”

“I am much flattered—charmed—that such a little effort on my part has been so

successful," replied the signor, modestly, and retiring from the piano; "I thought only to please my little friend here and myself—but it is *très peu de chose*—I hardly call that music."

"Ah, you are very musical, I am sure, Monsieur le Comte," said Agnes; "perhaps you will kindly give us another specimen."

"*A la bonne heure*, surely," replied the signor, "but for to-day I have made noise enough. It is time now we should depart. I must remind Madame that the time flies here. I fear, too, she will tire herself; she is forgetful of all but the pleasures of the society in which she finds herself, and her health is not what you call robust."

"Madame has not the appearance of an invalid," suggested Mrs. Beauclerc.

"Ah! she deceives you, then; that is

the worst of her *maladie*, that she looks so strong; but the *médécin*s are of the same advice, that she must keep early hours, and not enter much into society—it is too exciting. *Allons, mon amie,*" continued he, going up to his wife; "it is late, I have fears for your *santé*, let us make our *adieu*."

After a few more speeches, the Comte and his Comtesse were permitted to depart. Not, however, before he had received an invitation to join a little réunion a few evenings after, when Lady Loraine intended to make him useful in exhibiting his musical talents, for the entertainment of herself and friends.

After that introduction, dissimilar as were the characters and pursuits of the new acquaintances, they frequently met. Lady

Lorraine found a most attentive listener in Madame Riccardo, as to the history of the rise and progress of her various maladies; and as that lady's husband, with great consideration, always prevailed upon her to consult her health, and make an early retirement, she was never in the way when Lady Lorraine felt convalescent enough to enter into more general society. The signor himself was only too happy to come alone, and make himself useful in any way that his new friends might propose. Sir Arthur Stapleton, being a remarkably good-natured man, had no difficulty in tolerating the signor, and found him always so perfectly obliging and useful in many ways, that ere long he was admitted to a degree of intimacy that might have been more difficult

to attain had their acquaintance commenced on the other side of the Channel. Such as it was, however, at Florence, the signor, in his secret heart, determined it should remain when they met hereafter on British ground.

He easily gathered, from various sources, that Sir Arthur Stapleton was, in some measure, in pecuniary embarrassment. That Stephen Palmer also was the cause of considerable annoyance just then, he soon learned from Sir Arthur himself, who told him it arose in consequence of a determination expressed of calling in a certain mortgage on one of his estates held by Miss Newton's trustees, and which circumstances at that time rendered particularly inconvenient to him.

As soon as the signor fully understood

this fact, he felt prompted, by self-interested motives, to serve his new friend, and thus secure his good-will; he accordingly intimated to his wife that it would be desirable for her to withdraw her opposition to her niece's marriage with Stephen Palmer—in short, to make a virtue of necessity, or what must soon be so, and offer her signature to all the deeds, as required, and at the same time to suggest the expediency of lenient measures on the part of Clara and her husband towards a family with whom they would so shortly be connected.

The result of this newly-formed alliance between the houses of Riccardo and Stapleton, soon became evident to the party at Holycross House, by the receipt of a very amiable letter, addressed to Clara

Newton by her aunt. Not only did it include the free offer of her pardon for all past offences, but the proffer also of her signature to all the papers required for the purpose of facilitating her immediate marriage. The letter also contained some flattering mention of the object of her choice, and concluded with expressing a friendly desire of future family re-union. Nor did Mrs. Riccardo omit to allude to her intimacy with the Stapleton family, and her expectation of visiting them shortly after their return to England that summer, when she should hope also to see Clara and her husband, and all her friends at Holycross.

That this announcement, strange as it appeared, was not a pure fiction on the part of Mrs. Riccardo, was sufficiently

proved by a letter from Agnes to her sister, about the same time. In it Lady Stapleton mentioned their new acquaintances, briefly, it is true, but still in such terms as showed there might be foundation for the statements made in Clara's letter from her aunt.

Lillian was astonished—as well she might be—but she was yet far from that time of life when wonder ceases, and the most astounding events, and inconsistent conduct, is meekly and philosophically accepted and regarded as part and parcel of that strange world in which we live, and move, and have our being! Still, knowing and remembering the exclusive nature of Agnes's sentiments, and the light in which she had looked upon Mrs. Morris, and all belonging to her, when they had

formerly chanced to cross her path, it did occasion Lillian some little speculation as to the nature of the hidden spell which must have been at work to procure for the signor and his lady the most unlooked-for invitation to Stapleton Park the ensuing summer.

CHAPTER V.



HE three months of Gabriel's proposed absence had passed away meanwhile, but the termination of them brought only disappointment to Lillian; whilst Gabriel was compelled to relinquish all hope of returning at the time he originally hoped and expected to have done so.

It was vexatious enough; however, he toiled on cheerfully, and wrote word that another three months would no doubt see everything in so satisfactory a train, that

he should then be at liberty to return home. In the meantime, he entreated his wife to bear the remaining time of his exile as bravely as she had supported the first half of it. Then, to divert her thoughts, and relieve them of all apprehension, for his own sources of amusement in that weary time, he went on to expatiate upon the beauty of the productions of that climate, describing the various objects of natural interest from which he was collecting, in his leisure hours, specimens of the most curious and beautiful to bring home to her.

It was some comfort to Lillian's anxious heart to find her husband's toils were not without some alleviation, whilst enjoying the opportunities he mentioned to her, and which she knew he would appreciate

so highly. Therefore, feeling better satisfied on his account, she endeavoured to support her share of the disappointment with fortitude and cheerfulness.

Winter was now creeping slowly but surely on, and Lillian found the long evenings in Mrs. Palmer's society rather oppressive. It was an old family custom in the house of Hammond to dine earlier as the days shortened.

Lillian did not find this practice a pleasant one, or tending to render her prolonged stay more agreeable.

Mrs. Palmer, too, considered that the long evenings must be spent together by all who were staying in her house; consequently Lillian found she could not absent herself after dinner, for any length of time from the drawing-room, without

giving offence to that very tenacious lady; so she meekly submitted to pass the tedious hours in her presence. It was, however, a dreary obligation when there was no existing bond of sympathy, either of tastes or pursuits.

It was an agreeable addition to the younger members of the family party when Captain Linwood made one of it, for he brought a spirit of gaiety and life into the midst of it that was sadly wanting at other times.

Even Michael Hammond appeared to feel the genial influence, and continued to show the same hospitality and cordiality towards the young man that had marked his conduct ever since he had taken up his abode at Linwood Lodge; and even now that Gabriel was absent, he was equally

liberal with his invitations as when his younger brother was at home.

It is true, Henry Linwood had various other engagements, and the obligations of a military life were supposed to compel his frequent absence from the place he now seemed to prefer as a constant abode, for he still called the Lodge his home.

The constant appearance of Captain Linwood in their family circle at length attracted Mrs. Palmer's notice, and caused her many speculations, and much silent observation. She felt convinced, in the depths of her own mind, that there must be some particular attraction for him at Holycross House; and though for some time she could arrive at no definite conclusion, she began at last, as she imagined, to see her way more clearly, and was

always on the alert looking out for anything which might tend to confirm her suspicions as to the charm which drew the gay man of the world so constantly to their quiet fireside.

After a longer absence than usual, Captain Linwood re-appeared one day at Holycross House. He replied to Mrs. Palmer's constrained welcome (for he was no favourite of hers) with a half laugh.

"I am afraid you did not expect me back again so soon. You must be quite tired of seeing me, but it was irresistible. I met Mr. Hammond as I was crossing the market-place *en route* to the Lodge, and, with his usual hospitality, he asked me to dine with him—so, *me voilà!*"

"I certainly understood," replied his hostess in freezing accents, "that you

were returned to your regiment, therefore you must excuse any surprise I manifested at your unexpected appearance just now."

"Perhaps I shall surprise you still more," replied her guest, "by informing you that I am henceforth a free man, at full liberty to come and go where and when I please. In fact, I have sold my commission and left the Army."

"You do indeed astonish me!" said Mrs. Palmer. "It is early days to relinquish your profession and lead an idle life. You will soon tire of it, I think."

"Not more than I have wearied of the busy life I have hitherto led, I can assure you. The idea of repose is charming but how long the sensation will last is another question. Nothing that is plea-

sant is very enduring, at least as far as my own experience goes. Ah ! here is Stephen !” continued Captain Linwood as he entered the room ; “he can tell us something of the delights of occupation—improving every shining hour as it flies, and gathering golden honey.”

“Come, don’t quiz the bank,” said Stephen, rather sulkily ; “I don’t see any disgrace in a man’s attending to his profession, whatever it may be.”

“My dear fellow, I honour the bank, and banking and bankers, and only wish I had had the good luck to have been born one.”

Stephen looked at him distrustfully, and was beginning “The bank,” when Clara stopped him rather impatiently, saying—

"Do close the bank for this evening, Stephen. I really cannot submit to have it dragged into the drawing-room at all times and seasons."

"Well, at all events, you need not be ashamed of it;" then recollecting himself, he hastily added, "It is really on your account, dearest, that I have been so busy of late. As you have appointed me your steward, I am anxious to prove myself a faithful one."

"You might prove yourself something besides a steward," returned Clara, with a little pout; for, truth to say, Stephen had then made his first appearance that day, and had not seen his lady-love before. However, he had left her in safe hands with his mother and Lillian, and was rather annoyed now at finding that

Captain Linwood had again obtruded himself on the family party.

About this time Clara received another and most important despatch from her aunt, containing all the required deeds, properly signed and executed, a messenger having been sent to Florence for the purpose, on the receipt of her first letter. There was, in consequence, no occasion for the further postponement of her marriage.

Stephen was happy at last; the day was fixed, and all things connected with their future establishment began to wear an air of busy forwardness.

Letters at this time were often arriving from the absent Gabriel, with full and particular accounts of all his proceedings; and these gave great satisfaction.

to his brother. He showed them to Stephen, and commented on their contents with something of a triumphant feeling, observing,

"Well, after all, Gabriel is proving himself as good a man of business as either you or I—he is becoming worthy of his name. I confess I did not at one time think there was any of the right stuff in him. I really believed he could think of nothing but birds and butterflies."

"Oh!" replied Stephen, "he finds time for them also—don't flatter yourself Gabriel does nothing but taste sugar and inspect invoices, and look after the agents and their accounts. No, no, he is making, I hear, the finest collection of stuffed birds and butterflies that can be seen;

and such a *hortus siccus* as will beat all natural flowers out of the field. No, what is natural to a man will come to the surface, depend upon it, whatever it may be ; and Gabriel is more at home with the birds and flies than the other business."

" Well, never mind, if he attends well to both," replied Michael, resignedly.

" The query is," replied Stephen, with apparent hesitation, " *does* he attend well to both ? Pray forgive me, my dear uncle, but you know I am a plain, practical man, and cannot perhaps enter into my uncle Gabriel's sentimentalities. I am quite sure he *wishes* to fulfil your intentions in respect to the West Indian affairs ; and he writes, no doubt, according to what the agents tell him and he believes ; but at the same time he writes to his wife,

(I hear through Clara) of his constant occupation and amusement in the pursuits to which I have alluded. If he finds time for both, well and good; but we all know and remember which was uppermost at home."

"Pooh! pooh!" exclaimed Michael, impatiently; "we send the poor fellow there without wife, or child, or friend, or follower, and then we grudge his beguiling a few weary hours in the way you describe. Look here, Stephen; you speak, I know, as you feel, and you would give *all* your time to business, no doubt, if you were in his place—for even now you seem to prefer it to Clara."

"I hope, sir; replied Stephen, rather sententiously, "that I *do* prefer my duty to every other consideration."

"Well, that may be; but your duty just now is to make yourself as agreeable as you can," replied his uncle. "By-the-way, what is all this business about the Stapleton mortgage? Clara has been asking me about it."

This was not a pleasant hearing to Stephen, whose earnest desire was to keep his future wife entirely ignorant of every detail respecting her property, from a jealous fear of her claiming any power hereafter in its control and appropriation. He desired that everything should pass through his hands, and his covetous heart begrudged even the mention of a certain yearly sum out of her own large possessions to be made over to her sole and separate use. He was, however, forced to concede the point when the settlements

were in process of making, but registered a vow in his sordid heart that he would find some plausible pretence for withholding the same when the payment became due after marriage.

He did not like the sort of implied mistrust which Clara's application to his uncle about the mortgage indicated, and he felt extremely angry and vexed with Lillian, thinking that the application had been made through her by Agnes. He was, however, mistaken, as it was from her aunt that Clara heard of the whole affair.

Stephen was still more annoyed when Clara refused to discuss the subject with him; merely observing, that she had asked Mr. Hammond, as the trustee and guardian of herself and property, to make any arrangement in the business on which they

had written to her, that might be for the advantage of Sir Arthur Stapleton.

“Then you would not trust me, Clara, to do him a kindness?”

“It seems you have already refused to do so, as far, and further, than you were empowered to act!” she replied, with rising colour.

“Oh! Clara, sweetest! how can you misjudge me so?” exclaimed her lover. “My earnest wish to do you justice exposes me to the misery of your displeasure. You are ever my first consideration. Surely you cannot be surprised that I consider *your* interests before that of any other living creature? Do me the justice, dearest, to view my conduct in that light.”

"I don't know," replied Clara, wearily. "Some people would say that you consider your own interest in mine. Well! well! I do not intend to be unkind, but you must remember, it is a natural consideration under the circumstances; and then, I know you have an ancient grudge against the Stapletons."

"What *do* you mean?" asked Stephen, growing perfectly white with suppressed passion, and biting his lips to restrain the angry words that sought to force their way.

"Oh! nothing very particular, or worth remembering," replied Clara, laughing nervously.

"Who told you?" asked her lover.
"Lillian, I suppose?"

"Lillian? poor child! What should she

know about it? She was not a member of your happy family at that time; but I remember it all well, myself. As to the mortgage affair, my aunt is the delinquent. But pray let us say no more on the subject; I am sure it is not a very pleasant one."

As Clara spoke she turned away, and took up a book; but tears fell upon the pages, and the lines swam before her eyes. It was a chilly day, and as she drew her chair nearer to the fire she shivered, and then tried to hide her agitation by holding up her book between her face and the blaze.

Stephen kept his place by her side, but was, for some time, too angry to try to make his peace. At last the reflection of how much was at stake in-

duced him to try and regain his lost footing in Clara's estimation.

She heard him in silence, and, in reply, only said,

"I know I am very stupid in all business matters, and you are very clever; but if you would but tell me before you act in my name, it would save a great deal of misconstruction and discomfort. Once for all, it is my wish to act kindly whenever I have the power to do so, most especially by those so near and dear to Lillian as the Stapletons are. So the sooner you will have the kindness to repair the late mistake about this mortgage, the better I shall be pleased."

Clara rose as she said this, and left the room, leaving Stephen's mind in a tempest of wrath and indignation; and

that wrath was chiefly directed against Lillian, as the innocent object of Clara's affection, and consequent regard for the Stapletons. He also felt greatly annoyed at his uncle's mention of Gabriel, and only wished the latter might be tired of his undertaking, and induced to return home and disappoint his brother's anticipations. In fact, this apparently happy man was miserable just then.

It was but a few mornings after this that Mrs. Palmer asked her son what was the matter? She might well inquire, for she had passed Clara in tears going up-stairs, and found Stephen pacing the morning-room with every symptom of disquietude in his countenance and manner.

"Matter!" exclaimed Stephen, turning hastily, as his mother entered. "Matter

enough, I think, to drive a man out of his mind! Really Clara is become so captious, and exacting, and cross, it is impossible to please her. I am sure I wish we were fairly married, and had done with all this bother!"

Mrs. Palmer could not repress a grim smile at her son's idea of ending his troubles in that way, and asked whether he might not find more cause for dispute after marriage than before.

"Not I," returned Stephen, coolly; "trust me for managing a wife when I have got one. I have a receipt or two for taming a shrew, all ready to my hand. I only long for the opportunity of putting one of them in practice. When I saw my young lady fly out, as she did just now, at something I said about not

having company at Elmswell Park just after our return, as I wished to be alone with her, and not have Mrs. Gabriel directly to stay with us, she began to cry like a baby, and said she should have visitors whenever she pleased, and as many of them as she liked, without consulting any living soul. Pleasant hearing that for a husband elect!"

"I used to think," observed Mrs. Palmer, "that she would be very easily managed, and although she was rather weak, she was very good-tempered."

"Oh, yes!" returned her son, "she is good-tempered enough when she is pleased and flattered, and made a fuss with all day long. She is getting quite spoilt. I used to think as you do, but she is becoming quite headstrong and unmanageable.

To think of her interfering with my management of her affairs, about that stupid mortgage!"

"I know," said Mrs. Palmer; "but I suppose you must humour her."

"Not I! I shall manage to evade all further discussion till after we are married, and I am not answerable for what she chooses to write in the meantime. Besides, she understands nothing about it. I am determined to call in that money—I have, in fact, already got the finest opening in view for another investment; but"—suddenly checking himself—"we need not talk of those things now, only it will go no further with you, I am sure, and you will know how to discourage any remarks she may happen to make to you on the subject; and if Mrs. Lillian begins talking

about the Stapletons' embarrassments, you will turn a deaf ear."

"She is not likely to do that. Mrs. Gabriel never makes any family communications to me, or to Clara in my presence."

"Very likely; she has too much sense, I daresay. Why, Lillian has more sense in her little finger than Clara has in her whole body!"

"That is the more fortunate for you!" returned his mother; "for those very sensible, clever women want to know everything, and be consulted and referred to on every occasion; whereas you have some chance of governing a fool—not that I consider Clara in that light."

"I hope not—weak as she is—for there is nothing harder to manage than an

absolute fool. No, no, poor little soul ! she has her good points ; but just now she is terribly cross-grained ; some one must have been prompting her on the subject I mention, and I suspect, as I tell you, it is Lillian!"

"She had better not interfere," said Mrs. Palmer, severely, "for I have observed a good deal in her own conduct of late that is not altogether what it ought to be!"

"Indeed !" said Stephen, opening his eyes. "What ! has she been putting Clara up to any more of her foolish extravagance—for that is Mrs. Gabriel's weak point, though it has been kept tolerably in abeyance of late ?"

"Oh ! no, nothing of that kind," replied Mrs. Palmer, shaking her head

ominously and mysteriously, till all its decorations vibrated with the movement.

“What then?” asked her son, shortly.

“Why, can’t you see the way she is going on with that disagreeable, affected man, Captain Linwood; encouraging his visits here, and talking to him, and making herself particular with him every time he does come?”

“Oh!” exclaimed the enlightened Stephen, with something of a prolonged whistle; “that’s it, is it?”

“Indeed, I have every reason to fear it is,” said his mother. “I have felt quite disgusted with her for some time past; and when you are married and leave the house, I shall give Mr. Hammond a hint not to ask him here any more; he comes, I suppose, as your friend now—

after you are gone, there can be no pretence of that kind."

"I am sure there is none now," said Stephen, with perfect sincerity; "there is no love between us, as it is; I hate his nasty, cool, patronizing, sneering ways, and never speak to him if I can help it. It is all my uncle's own foolish fancy for his company; they talk together without ceasing when you leave the room. You have no idea how that fine gentleman makes up to Michael Hammond; and as for him, I have no patience to see the way he listens, and is amused with his silly stories. If I attempt to put in a word of sense or business, I am quite laughed down. My uncle ought to be ashamed of himself; he is not half the man he was; he is getting into his dotage, I think; but

now you have accounted for it all. They seem to be playing a nice game between them. Gabriel catching butterflies in the West Indies—I believe *that* was the reason which made him so ready to go there, and humbugging Michael with long accounts of his proceedings on the estate; and Mrs. Gabriel meanwhile amusing herself here with his intimate friend, transferred for the time to his brother's keeping."

"Well, I say nothing but what I have seen," replied Mrs. Palmer; "and I only wonder you never observed anything of it yourself."

"Why, you see, I have my own game to play—and a very arduous one I find it sometimes—so I have no time to watch others; but I shall take the earliest oppor-

tunity of making my own observations."

"That you may easily do," said his mother, looking out of the window, "for I see the happy pair walking in the garden together; he is just come up from the Lodge, and takes the liberty, I perceive, of using the private entrance to the grounds."

Stephen started to his feet, and ran to the window, but only just in time to see the sweep of Lillian's black dress as it disappeared behind a screen of evergreens; she and her companion were evidently prolonging their walk in the shrubberies.

"Here," said Mrs. Palmer, taking up some letters that lay on the table, "here are some letters for Mrs. Gabriel; one from the West Indies, and one, I see, from the East."

"No doubt," replied her son, "from that young scamp of a brother of hers there. Has anything ever been heard of him and his goings on there?"

"I believe he does pretty well now," said Mrs. Palmer. "I have no doubt Gabriel has fooled away lots of money upon him; but I want you to take these letters, and go quietly—you understand me—and see what they are after and talking about—it will be a good excuse for your looking after her."

"Excellent!" replied Stephen, fully entering into the spirit of the undertaking; and, taking the letters in his hand, he walked into the pleasure-grounds, and in the direction he knew that Lillian and Captain Linwood must have taken. His object was not, however, to confront them

openly, but to steal after them, and if possible overhear something of their conversation. He soon saw them, for they walked slowly and talked earnestly together; in fact, there could be little doubt but that the subject that engrossed them was one of deep interest.

This entire pre-occupation on their parts enabled Stephen to gain upon them unperceived, and follow them by a winding path which ran parallel for a few yards, and then led into the wider one, in which they walked side by side.

The intervening bushes hid him from their sight, and when within a few feet of the opening they stopped. Henry Linwood spoke, and so earnestly, that Stephen was emboldened to draw nearer and try and catch a few words of what he said.

He uttered them rapidly, but Stephen plainly heard him say—

“And now you know all—I see you blame me, but yet I trust I need not despair.”

Lillian paused a moment, then said in a low voice, but without displeasure—

“I feared as much; but pray never speak to me on this subject again.”

He replied—

“What can I do?—I am so miserable!”

Here a little dog that belonged to Lillian—it was a pet of Gabriel’s—caught sight of the spy amongst the laurels, and began barking, when Stephen, to save appearances, came forward with the letters in his hand and an air of unconsciousness of having intruded inopportunely.

His assumption of ease was boldly put on; but the pair he confronted were evidently startled and alarmed at his unexpected appearance. For once Captain Linwood's easy *sang-froid* deserted him; and he called the little dog to him with an accent of actual embarrassment. Lillian, too, coloured deeply.

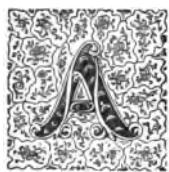
Stephen glanced from one to the other with an air of perceptible satisfaction, tinged with a portion of malice, and observed drily—

“I heard you were out walking, and my mother thought you might like to have your letters, as one of them is from the West Indies, so I have brought them.”

“Oh! thank you! I am indeed very much obliged to you, for this is from Gabriel.”

And Lillian took it with such an air of eagerness, that Stephen was somewhat justified in his mental exclamation—"Was there ever such a hypocrite?"

CHAPTER VI.



AFTER Stephen's report to his mother of the understanding between Lillian and Captain Linwood, she made a point of exhibiting her sense of Lillian's misconduct by the most repellent behaviour towards her.

This was unhappily without much effect, for Lillian seemed for the most part absorbed in her own thoughts, and, as she had never had much in common with her sister-in-law, she did not apparently regret

the cessation of the tittle-tattle of local gossip with which Mrs. Palmer was wont to regale her in lieu of better conversation.

There was not, however, room for the display of any active hostility towards the gentleman, for about the same time Captain Linwood's visits came suddenly to a close, and she was—notwithstanding her virtuous indignation against him and Lillian—rather vexed at not having any further opportunity for making observation, or for resenting their conduct; and she was also obliged to come to the conclusion that Lillian had not been as encouraging as she believed, and, it must be confessed, hoped she had been.

Mr. Hammond alone openly regretted the departure of his favourite; and observed

he should be glad to see him at the Lodge again. It happened when he said this that his sister was alone present. She looked up from her work with a severe aspect, and remarked:

"If you knew as much' as I do of Captain Linwood, you would rejoice that he is gone, and never wish to see him in this house again."

"What has he done to offend you?" asked Michael, quietly.

"Made love to my brother's wife," replied Mrs. Palmer, as succinctly.

With one step Michael crossed the room, and confronted his sister.

"Are you speaking the truth?—do you mean in sincerity what you say?"

"Of course I do, or else I shouldn't say it," replied Mrs. Palmer, stiffly.

Michael surveyed her for a moment in silence, then asked:

“How do you know it?”

“By my own observation, and what others have heard him say.”

“Tell me what he said, and who heard him say it.”

Mrs. Palmer obeyed.

Michael drew a long breath.

“Well, at all events, he met with no encouragement.”

“Not at that time, perhaps; but her conduct was always encouraging in the extreme, or he would not have dared to say as much then.”

“I never observed it,” said Michael.

“I daresay not, but I did, so was not surprised at his making her an open declaration of love.”

"Have you ever spoken to her?" asked Michael at length—"ever warned her on the subject?"

"Me! goodness, no! She would have thought it a very great liberty on my part; and really Mrs. Gabriel is quite old enough to take care of herself."

"But you are old enough to be her mother, poor soul! and she is quite alone amongst us; a word from you might have had great effect. However, no doubt she has done what is right, for Captain Linwood has never been here since the day you speak of."

"Never to *our knowledge*," returned Mrs. Palmer, in an oracular voice.

"What do you mean?—that Lillian Hammond meets Captain Linwood in secret? Speak out!" continued Michael,

imperatively—"is that your meaning?"

"Well, no one has exactly seen them; but I heard of two people resembling them being seen in the dusk the other evening, walking in the plantation."

"*Resembling* them!—a nice quibble!" exclaimed Mr. Hammond. "I don't believe a word of it. Lillian is always with her boy or writing to her husband, or reading his letters. Poor girl! We have sent him away from her, and now we must rob her of her good name!"

"Very well," returned Mrs. Palmer, coolly; "I don't want to prejudice you against her, but you will be convinced, perhaps, when it is too late. I thought it my duty, when I wrote to Gabriel the other day, to intimate that friends were not always to be trusted."

"*What have you told him?*" asked Michael, sharply.

"Just what I have told you. Now, in some cases a hint is enough; and if he tells her what I say when he next writes, it may have the desired effect, without my burning my fingers."

"You ought to be pretty sure the hint is required before you give it," said Michael.

"I could not be mistaken on that point, after what Stephen heard when he took Lillian her letters. I have not mentioned his wife."

"I hope you have not done mischief," said Michael, gloomily. "But, at all events, Linwood is gone; and if he ever did transgress in the way you suppose, it is clear that Lillian is doing right; no—I don't mistrust her."

Mr. Hammond left the room, and Mrs. Palmer indulged in a smile that did not tend to beautify her countenance; but it may be recorded she now began to *hope* that she might prove right and her brother wrong, and watched eagerly for proof.

Nothing farther, however, transpired at that time to excite inquiry or provoke alarm. Lillian pursued her usual avocations, as if unaware that she had given rise to any surmise respecting the perfect propriety of her conduct. The only symptom that Mrs. Palmer was able to detect of any consciousness on her part was when she indulged in any remark concerning the unusual absence of Captain Linwood, and her conjecture as to whether he intended to fulfil a promise, made some time ago, of being present on the day of Clara's wedding—

and then she blushed and looked uneasy. That day was now fast approaching. The last week of Clara's freedom dawned. It was Monday. The marriage was to take place the following Thursday. It was settled that Stephen was to go up to town that day to superintend some final preparations, and bring their new travelling carriage down. He was to go by an early train, spend the Tuesday in London, and return home the following afternoon, in time for the settlements to be read over and duly signed and sealed. He took a very affectionate leave of his bride-elect. They had been on better terms of late, for after their last recorded quarrel, Clara had ceased to dispute any point with her future lord and master. She had, in fact, sunk into a state of premature

submission and obedience. Stephen was rejoiced at the change, and made the most of it. He drew out a perfect little code of domestic laws and regulations. To his delight, he found Clara passive—she appeared to have no will but his.

He began then to taste the sweets of power and property in prospect. He breathed more freely in the absence of Captain Linwood, whose constant presence had weighed heavily upon him. He felt, after his departure, that he was more fully lord of himself and all around. He perceived with exultation that he was deferred to as a man of future importance; even his uncle, he fancied, looked small beside him; and as for Mr. Forster, he dwindled into a state of insignificance bordering on contempt. Stephen, in fact, became almost

pompous in his demeanour, notwithstanding his efforts to preserve amongst his friends what has been aptly termed “a happy mixture of dignity and affability;” but at that season there was not a word or look that emanated from him that was not redolent of the coming grandeur of Mr. Newton Palmer.

His mother, too, was scarcely less impressed than himself with a sense of his impending importance, and almost forgot that it was not an inherent quality of his own, but to be derived from his union with Clara Newton. They both seemed to consider that she was the person to be exalted on the occasion. Clara had received her aunt’s letter of reconciliation in a good spirit, and replied to it in the same; for she felt the truth of .

what Lillian, with considerate kindness, urged upon her, that her notice of her aunt, and that of other friends, might be the means of keeping a check upon the signor's conduct to her, and possibly of rendering her married life more happy than it might otherwise have been.

Mr. Hammond showed a decided preference for his future niece, which she seemed to return in all sincerity; and he was perfectly docile under all the suggestions made by his sister that her wedding-day should be honoured, and as gay as they could make it.

Mrs. Palmer was in her element settling all the arrangements and preparations for this *jour de fête*. On the Monday, after Stephen's departure, seeing Mr. Hammond about to leave the house on his accus-

tomed constitutional walk, she asked him to go as far as Mr. Forster's with some message to the family there, relative to the festivities of Thursday, which she intended should include a dinner, as well as a *déjeuner* after the departure of the bride and bridegroom.

Michael was unusually amiable and complying on the occasion. He received his orders, walked to his friend's house, found Harriet Forster at home, paid her a short visit, delivered his message, understood her answer, and set off on his return home.

On leaving the house, he pulled out his watch rather hastily to ascertain the hour, and in so doing the chain to which it was attached gave way, the watch fell to the ground, and the glass was broken.

Happily that was the only injury, and so slight a one, that he determined to lose no time in having it repaired.

Mr. Hammond had just entered the town ; it was the end furthest from his own habitation, and the shops in that quarter were comparatively strange to him. He went into the first jeweller and watchmaker's he could see, and requested the man to fit a glass to his watch. Whilst his order was being executed, Michael beguiled the time with looking over the various toys and trinkets which were displayed upon the counter and in the cases beneath the glasses. Whilst so doing, his eye was caught by an object which brought something to his mind, though he could not at the moment tell precisely what it was that it recalled.

The article in question was a pin for a gentleman's scarf. It was of gold, thickly studded with turquoises. He took it up to examine it closely, turning it round as he did so. The scrutiny with which he regarded the trinket in his hand attracted the attention of the jeweller, as he fitted the glass to the watch; and although he was unknown to Mr. Hammond, the person of the rich banker was perfectly familiar to the tradesman, and he replied to the look of inquiry which Michael bent on the pin, saying,

"I daresay you are well acquainted with that article, sir, and recognize it?"

"Well, yes, I think I have seen it, or something very similar, though I can hardly say where."

"Oh! doubtless, sir, doubtless. You are

quite right, Mr. Hammond, for your sister, Mrs. Palmer, brought it back to me a few days ago. She purchased it here, and another like it, a few years back."

"When?" interrupted Michael, the whole history rushing full into his mind, of Gabriel's pin, and the one found in his strong closet.

"I can tell you exactly, sir," replied the man; and, looking over his ledger, he named the very day.

"Ah! when I was laid up—just about the time—I begin to see it all!" muttered Michael to himself.

"Well, sir, the lady kept the pins some two or three years, as you see, and then brought one back the other day, saying she did not like or want it any longer, and wished to change it for some-

thing for a wedding present, which she did, excepting some small difference in price in the article she chose. It was a very chaste and elegant brooch, sir; but possibly you have seen it ere this?"

"Is my watch done?" was all the reply that Michael vouchsafed; and the answer being in the affirmative, he threw down the money and departed.

He walked along deep in thought; then suddenly seeming to come to some conclusion, he altered his homeward course, and bent his steps towards some of the poorer houses of the town. Having reached the one he sought, he tapped at the door, and being told to come in, lifted the latch and did as he was desired.

The person he wished to see was at home—it was a woman, and she was alone at her tea-table. The sight of Mr. Hammond caused a movement of intense surprise. She rose hastily, curtseying, with an exclamation of—

“Lor bless me, sir! Mr. Hammond, surely!—but it’s you yourself. Well, if I ain’t right astonished and surprised like! But you look quite poorly now, so I hope your visit’s not professional? I hope I see you well, sir? Pray take a seat?”

Michael, however, cut the good woman’s harangue short with an impatient gesture, and said—

“I only wished to inquire of you, Mrs. Salmons, whether you recollect all the circumstances of the time you at-

tended me, two or three years ago? Answer me as much to the point as you can?"

"To be sure I do, sir, as if it was yesterday," said the woman, who was the nurse that had attended him in his illness.

Mr. Hammond's questions were not many, or his visit long; but it served, with the testimony of other things, to establish the conviction in his mind that it was not Gabriel, but his sister and nephew, who had visited his strong chest whilst he lay insensible on his sick-bed. He had long since ceased to suspect Gabriel, on his own assertion of innocence the night before he left Holycross. It was, nevertheless, very satisfactory to a man of so methodical a turn of mind and

habits as Michael that he should receive *proof* as well as profession on any doubtful subject. He had often considered the matter in his own mind, but could never see his way clearly through it before. The pin he discovered at the jeweller's shop was the first link in the required evidence ; the woman's story furnished the remainder.

It is probable Mrs. Salmons was at first alarmed at the unexpected visit of her former patient, fearing he came to make some complaint concerning her conduct, recollecting the charge Mrs. Palmer had chosen to bring against her, of having been drinking on the night she was unable to attend her brother. This, therefore, was the point to which she immediately reverted, observing how unfounded

such a charge had been, and that she always had her own suspicions that some drug had been administered to her that night, to make her sleep as she had done, though she had never dared say so.

Michael hastened to re-assure her by saying that he had no complaint to make against her, nor was it likely he should prefer any after such a length of time as had elapsed since her attendance upon him; that his present inquiry was on a matter of little importance, but it related to something which had just come to his knowledge, and he wanted her testimony as to time, which a few questions and answers would quickly settle satisfactorily.

Mr. Hammond then drew from her the history of the night in question, she declaring she was soon roused from her heavy

sleep, and came to the door of the room two or three times before those within either seemed to hear, or cared to admit her. That it was Madam Palmer and her son who were there—and they alone—and that she heard them shut up the bureau just before they let her in; but she supposed it was no business of hers.

"No, certainly not," said Michael, cautiously. "My sister no doubt wanted something which she knew to be kept in it. Then it was Mr. Stephen, and not Mr. Gabriel, that kept watch with her that night?"

"Mr. Gabriel! oh! no, sir. He often wanted to come and sit by you, and would, chance times, steal in, and look at you with tears standing in his eyes, but Madam Palmer always tried to keep him

away. Belike she feared he might take the fever too, for he was but a very poor creature at one time, though he has grown up a fine likely young gentleman since. As for Mr. Stephen, I don't recollect him sitting up, or watching, any day or night but that."

"That will do, thank you," replied Michael; and, giving the woman a small gratuity, he left the house.

His mind was now perfectly satisfied on the subject that had so much perplexed it; but it gave place to a feeling of deep annoyance, amounting to displeasure, against his sister and nephew. He could not fathom the whole of their motives and intentions in the clandestine visit they had made to his private depository; but he felt it was for no good purpose, and the

underhand nature of the whole transaction excited a strong sensation in his mind of distaste for them both.

Michael was aware that it was not just then a fitting or reasonable time to take any notice of these long past proceedings, and therefore, with his habitual calmness and self-control, he determined to postpone all mention of the subject to his sister and his nephew. He came to the conclusion that they had been possessed by a spirit of ungovernable curiosity, and induced, probably, by the prospect of his near decease, to endeavour to obtain some insight into the state of his affairs, from the documents supposed to be contained in the iron closet.

It was not very gratifying to his feelings to see what was the uppermost con-

sideration at such a time in the minds of those nearest to him, and who had, for so many years, been the recipients of his bounty. But Michael was not sentimental, and he took a very practical view of human nature and its manifold infirmities.

“Daughter of Eve!—daughter of Eve!” was his reflection as he walked home-wards, looking down, with his hands behind his back, deeply pondering to this effect: “Keep a door locked, and it is the sure way to make them wild to break it open! And *he* too! he must needs have a peep also. The woman beguiled him, I suppose he would say. Mother or wife, it’s all the same; but she played a deep game with her pins to shift it all on poor Gabriel’s honest shoulders.

I must have it all out with her one day or other—I know I shan't rest till I have—that's the worst of it. I'd forgive her peeping—but—but— Well, we must get this wedding fairly over first ; but my mind begins to misgive me also whether I have done right about that—I fear the poor girl will find she has got a stiff bargain there ; but it was all her own doing—her choice, not mine."

"I beg your pardon!"

These last words were jerked out hastily, in consequence of Michael, in the depth of his reverie, having run up against a foot-passenger, who, like himself, was walking without heeding where he went.

As the other pedestrian turned out to be Mr. Forster, the only result of the

encounter was a laugh at each other's expense.

After standing a few minutes in conversation, Mr. Hammond said he had just been paying his daughter a visit.

"I wish," said his friend, "I had seen you, for I want to have a little talk with you. Would you come and dine quietly with me this evening, and then I can make you acquainted with the subject of my deliberations."

"Not business, I hope!" exclaimed Michael, for the first time in his life openly evading that topic. "I have taken a holiday. I knew you were at the bank; and Stephen's away."

"Yes, I know Stephen's absent," said Mr. Forster, "or I would have applied to him, as it is, or rather will be,

more his affair than yours or mine ; but he takes things now with such a high hand, that I do not care to make more demands upon his time and attention than are absolutely necessary. I should be glad, therefore, of a word with you."

"As many as you please," returned Mr. Hammond : "I will go home, and be with you by six o'clock."

The two partners then separated. Michael went to his own house, not sorry to be spared a meeting with his sister that evening, in the first flush and flurry of the discovery he had made respecting her duplicity and underhand conduct.

The subject of Mr. Forster's communication need not be very fully entered into. It regarded the mortgage which Miss Newton held on Sir Arthur Stapleton's pro-

perty to a large amount; and the cause of Mr. Forster's annoyance was that Stephen Palmer, in anticipation of his marriage, chose already to assume the power which that event might ultimately give him, and threw every impediment in the way of the fulfilment of Miss Newton's expressed wishes for an amicable adjustment of the matter in question. This had been evidently a vexatious proceeding on the part of Stephen Palmer, and Mr. Forster had only just become aware of it.

Michael was greatly annoyed at the tone Stephen was now assuming in the affairs of the firm, which were concerned in the present transaction to some extent.

Stephen had, however, of late become so completely head-manager on his uncle's account, that everything was now referred

to him, and all Mr. Hammond could do on the occasion was to promise, as soon as his nephew returned, to have an understanding with him upon the subject.

Michael had remained later than usual with his friend, engrossed with the discussion of such topics as naturally arose out of the business in which they were both interested; and the hall-clock had struck midnight when he ordered his carriage and returned home.

No one was allowed to sit up when Mr. Hammond dined out alone. He let himself into the house with his own key. The fire was burning, and lamp ready for lighting in his own room, which was, as we have seen, on the ground floor.

Michael sat for some time after his

return deep in thought ; there was a strange sense of depression on his mind, and his heart sank within him as the emptiness and real worthlessness of all he had hitherto sought for so eagerly rose up before him.

He could not turn his thoughts from a vision which would obtrude itself upon them. It was that of himself lying speechless, and to all appearance dying on that bed, whilst his nearest relations were employed in greedily ransacking his private hoards, to see what they might appropriate as soon as his last breath was drawn. Then his imagination wandered on into that unseen world into which he could carry nothing away with him of those treasures he had heaped up here, and still so fondly worshipped.

Michael shuddered when he thought how little he (good moral man as he had always been esteemed) knew of that world on whose confines his failing steps had then lingered—how near he had been to entering it with a soul so unprepared, so closely riveted to the wealth he was about to leave behind.

It may seem strange these reflections had never presented themselves before to Michael Hammond ; but certain it is, if in the hour of recovery they had done so, they were treated as unwelcome guests, and speedily dismissed as such. He had, in fact, risen up from his sick-bed as hard and covetous a man as he had laid himself down upon it, and as little regardful of, and grateful to, the forbearing mercy which had preserved him from the two-

fold death of body and soul. The various events and disclosures of that day had no doubt contributed to bring Michael into this unwonted frame of mind ; and it might have been that a word or two dropped by his friend, who was a serious-thinking man, might, humanly speaking, have given the bias to his midnight thoughts. But it must have been a higher power that urged him, ere he slept, to seek a much neglected book, and directed him to seek and find the words he there read with an altered and teachable spirit, and which said to him—

“ But they that will be rich fall into temptation and many hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition ; for the love of money is the root of all evil ! ”

After that, Michael sought his couch,
and his dreams that night were not all of
gold.

CHAPTER VII.



T was the early part of December at the time we speak of, and the nights were at their longest. The morning hours had barely numbered five, when Mr. Hammond was awakened from the late sleep into which he had fallen by a low knocking at his door. It was at that entrance which led into the offices; the one opening into his sitting-room was locked, as well as the outer door, and there was

therefore no communication with his bedroom except that way.

Michael started up from his uneasy slumber, and he thought of the knocking which the nurse said she had made, when it was so long disregarded by all within. In the present instance it was a cautious appeal, as if fearful of arousing anyone in the house but himself. His first impulse was to call out—"Come in!" the next—"Who is there?"

The answer was in the familiar tones of his sister, which blended strangely with the subject of his dreams, causing a slight revulsion of feeling on his part. But quickly overcoming it, he asked what was the cause of her coming to his door at that hour of the night, or morning, as might be. The reply was—

"Oh! get up for mercy's sake! Something must be done—she's off!"

"Good heavens! what are you talking about? Go round to my study, and I will meet you there."

In a few minutes the brother and sister stood face to face. Mrs. Palmer, now that the event she had long predicted had come to pass, looked white and agitated.

"Yes!" said she, in answer to Michael's look of inquiry; "it is true enough—you would never believe me; but Lillian is gone off with Captain Linwood!"

"Take care what you say!" replied Mr. Hammond, shaking as if under the influence of a fit of ague. "How do you know? What makes you think such a horrible thing? You must be dreaming!"

"No more than you are at this moment. I have been kept awake, what with thinking about Thursday and all my preparations, and then that dreadful rheumatism, so altogether I could get no sleep. I heard you come home, and the carriage go round, and after that the house seemed quiet enough; but at last the pains were so unbearable that I got up to look for some of my drops. As the light was low I went to the window; it was nearly an hour ago, and the moon was full up. My eye immediately fell upon a moving shadow amongst the evergreens; it came out, and stood for a moment at the end of the plantation, close to the house, on my side. I continued to watch its movements, without being seen myself. I soon saw the figure was that of a man wrapped in a long dark cloak,

His hat was drawn down over his brow ; but as he came out into the full moon-light, which was bright and clear, he looked up to the house, and I immediately dis-cerned the face and bearing of Captain Linwood. He had not long to wait this cold frosty night. I heard the side garden door open very cautiously—the passage, you know, runs underneath my room—a lady came out, and I recognised Lillian ; she was instantly joined by the person, who evidently was waiting for her ; they walked off together, disappearing down the shrub-bery walk. I immediately ran down-stairs, as well as I could with my rheumatic knee, and lost no time in bolting the door, which had been carefully closed after them."

"What induced you to do that ?" asked the horror-struck Michael.

"You need hardly ask," returned his sister. "Why, to prevent any chance of such a lost, wretched creature ever entering your doors again. But my caution was quite superfluous, for as I regained my room, and again looked from the window, I heard distinctly, on the hard frosty grounds, the sound of a carriage driving rapidly away. So it is quite clear she is gone, and we shall see her no more."

"Good God! how shocking!" exclaimed Michael. "Poor Gabriel! what will become of him?"

"Ah! it will kill him, most likely," said Mrs. Palmer, with much acrimony. "Really it would be quite a pity he should ever return now. He had much better remain where he is."

"Hush! hark! What is that noise?" said Michael, as they stood by the open door of his study, which adjoined the hall.

A low, wailing cry came down the broad, echoing staircase. They listened and shuddered—it was repeated more loudly.

"Oh! it is the child!" said Mrs. Palmer, with some touch of womanly feeling in her cold heart. "She has had it in her own room, to sleep with her, ever since the nurse was ill with influenza in the beginning of the winter. I daresay she left it asleep, and it is just awake, and frightened to find itself alone."

"Go! go!" exclaimed Michael, with agitation in his voice and manner. "Run and bring him here. No, take him to his nurse, poor little deserted being!"

Mrs. Palmer required no second order, for she longed to inspect the apartment which the guilty woman had so recently left, and see whether there was any note or sign left behind. She repaired, as hastily as her lameness would allow, to the door of the room so lately occupied by Lillian, Mr. Hammond, in his bewilderment, following closely upon her steps. She threw the door wide open, as another shriek met her ear. She was immediately confronted on the threshold by—by Lillian herself, with her boy screaming in her arms, who looked, as she well might, flurried and astonished at the spectacle of Mrs. Palmer, followed by her half-dressed brother, thus bursting into her apartment, and both starting back with such evident surprise and confusion.

Michael was the first to recover himself, and was for once surprised into an expression of genuine feeling, as he came hastily forward, and seized Lillian's hand, saying :

" Yes ! it is yourself, my dear ! Thank God, you are safe ! There—never mind—it's all right, as I thought ! "

He then turned quickly round to his sister, saying, in a low, significant tone, as he passed her :

" Wrong again, Mrs. Palmer ! You have made another false entry—you will have to be a little more careful in future, if we are to keep our books together."

Michael then abruptly left her to her own reflections.

Lillian, in her surprise at this visit, drew but one conclusion, that the screams

of the child had alarmed both her brother and sister-in-law, and she hastened to say to Mrs. Palmer, who stood night-capped and shawled, grimly surveying her, as she might an apparition :

“ Pray, don’t be frightened about us ! I fear we have disturbed the whole house ; but poor little Willie’s teeth tease him very much ; and when he once gets into these crying fits, I hardly know how to stop him—but he will be better soon.”

And then, to the infinite relief of his mother, the child’s screams began to abate, as his attention became directed to the unexpected objects presented to his view.

Mrs. Palmer muttered something about thinking “ the house was on fire,” as an excuse for her intrusion ; and then without

saying a word of what she had seen and fancied, to Lillian's great comfort took her departure. But as she turned from the door of one she had so wronged in her heart, a fresh, and to her mind a more horrible suspicion darted through her brain,—it made her turn her steps, no longer weak or faltering, with painful eagerness to another quarter of the house—to a room not far distant from her own. The door yielded to her touch—she entered—she spoke—she called aloud—no one answered—the room was untenanted—a white object on the dressing-table attracted her attention. With strange self-possession she seized it, and by strong concentration of her will she read these words—they were addressed to Mr. Hammond:

“Pardon, dear sir, the step I am taking.

I am compelled to fly your house, for I should die, or go mad, were I to remain and wait the event of Thursday. I shudder as I contemplate such a fate! By the time this reaches you, I shall have united my lot in life to that of the only man I ever really loved. You will not hear of me again until I am the wife of Captain Linwood.

“Yours gratefully,

“CLARA NEWTON.”

Mrs. Palmer looked at the paper, put it down, gazed round the empty room to be sure she was not dreaming or walking in her sleep; then the full measure of her son's misfortunes burst upon her, and her self-possession gave way. Ere long fresh screams were ringing down the staircase; and Michael, who had just then

settled himself in his disturbed bed, was summoned by frightened servants to come to his sister's assistance. He was then made aware of the real state of the case, and who now was, and ever had been, the object of Captain Linwood's admiration and love.

Mrs. Palmer, in her hysterical frenzy, uttered such wild exclamations, and displayed so much of the uncurbed malignity of her temper, that her brother stood aghast; whilst poor Lillian, who sought to soothe her, was fairly driven away by her reproaches and accusations. At last they succeeded in removing her from Clara's room to her own, and there leaving her under the care of her own maid, who administered a strong opiate, which in due time took effect.

After this the disturbed household crept back to their respective apartments, where most of them occupied themselves in talking over and speculating upon the strange events of the night.

The next morning, Michael and Lillian met alone in the breakfast-room. She felt almost reluctant to appear before him, fearing his distress at his nephew's disappointment would naturally be so great, and the displeasure against her friends proportionably excited. To her astonishment, however, Mr. Hammond met her with a cheerful countenance, and inquiry how she felt after her disturbed night, adding, "Well! my dear, I am glad you are none the worse for it, and I see no occasion for you and me to put on long faces about it, as I must confess to you I think it

one of the most fortunate things that could have happened for Clara. Although, mind, I don't approve of the way in which the whole thing has been carried on—or of these midnight flittings, which have taken us all so much by surprise ; but *you*, my dear, must have seen and known something of what was going on? I don't want to ask you anything you had rather not tell me, but I think you must have been a little bit in the secret—eh?"

"Not in the least, sir, as regarded Clara's confidence," returned Lillian, candidly. "It is true, Captain Linwood spoke to me once of his love and admiration for her, which I had already remarked with some degree of apprehension, but she gave me no reason to suppose she was aware of it. I begged him, on that occasion, never again to

name the subject to me, and strongly advised him to absent himself, which he accordingly did. I therefore hoped and concluded that all was at an end on his part; and, as I have said, I knew nothing of Clara's sentiments; but as it is, I cannot regret that things have taken this turn, and only wish, with you, that it had been done differently, and without causing such severe disappointment to others."

"Yes, indeed, my dear, it has been an unfortunate mistake altogether, and I will own to you that of late my mind has much misgiven me about it, especially last night, as I thought of that poor child being sacrificed to that cold-blooded nephew of mine. He would just as soon marry a lump of gold any day; but I won't abuse him, for I have helped to make him what he is.

Have you ever read that ‘covetousness is idolatry?’ ”

“ Yes,” replied Lillian, in a low solemn voice, playing with her teaspoon.

“ Ah!” said Michael, “ and there are more idolaters in this world than people would imagine in a Christian country, if that is true—eh! what do you think, my dear?”

“ I fear there are,” replied Lillian, “ for there are many idols in our hearts besides gold.”

“ But none that are more ensnaring,” continued Michael, meditatively; “ and, judging from myself, and what I see of fellow-worshippers, I begin to think more of the difficulty there may be of a camel going through the eye of a needle. But, happily, you know nothing about it, my

dear, nor does Gabriel, poor fellow!—no one is less of an idolater in that way than he is. Well, we will hear what he has to say on the subject when he comes home."

"Ah! if Gabriel were but here!" sighed his wife.

"Yes; and I believe I ought never to have sent him away from you—but it was to make more money, not having enough, I suppose. Well, we shall be having Stephen back on our hands to-day or to-morrow, which is not a pleasing prospect, in any way. I think I shall get him and his mother to move into a house of their own."

"Oh! sir, think how sadly they will suffer in this business. I never thought Stephen Palmer was suited to Clara, but

they were engaged to be married so soon, one cannot help pitying him and his mother."

"I should pity her much more if she had not behaved in such a way to you and me last night," said Michael, who had been fairly disgusted with the display of his sister's temper; and, since his suspicions had been aroused against her and her son, had experienced a sore and uncomfortable feeling in respect to them, and which gave rise, on this further provocation, to the wish just expressed. In fact, the knowledge of their proceedings during his illness presented a very strong objection in his mind to retaining them as inmates of his own house for the future.

It need hardly be observed, that Mr.

Hammond, at that time, knew but little of that Christian charity and forbearance which might have induced him to overlook this breach of confidence towards himself.

A telegraph message had been despatched to inform the expectant bridegroom of this overthrow of his hopes, and fuller particulars had been sent by post the same day; and ere long, all Holycross was ringing with the news of it, and the various versions of this strange affair. It was, indeed, an event to create a sensation in its usually quiet annals. Great, too, was the disappointment which all the inhabitants of the place experienced. They were cheated out of the spectacle of the gay wedding that was to have taken place within a couple of days.

The ancient town of Holycross, in fact, considered itself extremely ill-used. And as no one knew of, or suspected, any provocation the missing bride might have had for the step she had taken, the unanimous opinion was that Stephen Palmer in particular, and his family in general, were extremely ill-used also.

CHAPTER VIII.

TUESDAY passed. Mrs. Palmer still kept her room. Stephen neither returned, nor sent any reply to the communication forwarded to him from Holycross. Nothing was heard of him. His mother became more wretched than ever. No doubt he shrank from coming back to the scene of his bitter mortification.

Thursday, the expected wedding-day, arrived, and passed slowly away, and

still no news of Stephen. Mrs. Palmer could bear it no longer, and determined to go up to London, to the hotel where she knew her son was staying on this occasion, and where, on a previous one, he had accompanied his uncle. It was at that time he had sought to gain an interest for himself in Clara's affections.

When Mrs. Palmer emerged from the retirement of her own room, she was quite subdued, and looked so really ill, and was so much softened in manner, that both her brother and Lillian were moved with compassion; and with one accord, forgetting her past behaviour, begged to accompany her in her projected journey to London in search of her son. To this she gratefully acceded, and on the following morning the three left Holycross

House, and found themselves in London in the afternoon of the same day.

It was an old-fashioned hotel in Berners Street where the Hammond family were in the habit of taking up their quarters whenever they visited London. They had been well known there for many years past, and were always received with particular respect and attention. Mr. Hammond, with his usual punctuality, had written on the previous day to say they should require rooms, and mentioning the number of the party ; so when they arrived everything was in comfortable readiness for their reception.

The short winter afternoon was drawing to a close, and it was almost dark when they entered the long, large drawing-room which was prepared for them. Mrs. Palmer advanced in silence, and took her

place by the blazing fire, which was the most cheerful feature in that chill, dreary-looking apartment. Lillian followed her, with a sinking feeling at her heart, for which she could hardly account; but everything was sad and strange about her just then, and her friend Clara's unexpected flight had added to her desolation. She had expected, on Clara's return to Elmswell Park after her marriage, to have been her guest there for some time, perhaps until Gabriel's return.

All this was now at an end; and the uncomfortable feeling of family distress, in respect to Mrs. Palmer and her son, appeared likely to make her continued abode at Holycross House anything but agreeable at that time. It was true that Michael Hammond was kind beyond her utmost

expectations—that he was to her a changed man ; still there was not the opportunity of much intercourse between them, although what there was appeared to be almost affectionate in its character.

Lillian looked round this uninviting drawing-room, and at the clock upon the chimney-piece—it was a little more than four o'clock. There was a long, weary evening before them ; nor was the prospect enlivened by the momentary expectation of seeing Stephen Palmer make his appearance, which, in fact, made her feel unaccountably nervous. Still this was the event to which his mother alone looked forward with some degree of pleasurable hope, and she waited impatiently whilst Mr. Hammond left her to make the desired inquiries respecting him.

A very short time elapsed before Michael returned to his sister, and her eyes rested on him with such a wistful gaze of anxious questioning, that Lillian's heart throbbed with a sensation of motherly sympathy and interest.

"I fear," said Michael, in answer to this silent appeal, "that we have had our journey in vain. The master of the hotel tells me that Stephen packed up his things, paid his bill, and took his departure early on Wednesday, the day he was to have returned home."

Mrs. Palmer fixed her eyes upon her brother, as if to seek whether there was not some reserve, whether he had indeed told her all he knew of this loved son. But all was truly told; and although Michael wondered what had become of

Stephen, yet he did not feel any uneasiness on the subject, as he knew enough of his nephew to feel sure he would take care of himself. But at the present time he was, no doubt, deeply hurt and mortified by the events of the last few days, and would probably keep himself out of the way of Holycross until the nine days' wonder, and consequent gossip, had subsided. Nor was Michael surprised at his having left the hotel; he had remained there the full time for which he had engaged the apartments; and he felt sure his nephew would not recklessly run up a larger bill than necessary at a London hotel, especially considering his altered expectations.

"As we are here," said Mr. Hammond to his sister, "we may as well

remain till Monday. This is Friday, and it will give you and Lillian time for a day's shopping to-morrow, if you are inclined for the occupation."

Mrs. Palmer merely replied she should employ herself the following day in making inquiries after her son ; and then, complaining of headache, withdrew to her own room, where she remained the whole evening.

Somewhat to their surprise, Mrs. Palmer appeared at breakfast the following morning, and declared herself better. She looked, however, wretchedly ill and anxious ; but she made an effort to join in conversation, and also to partake of the repast as usual.

It was hardly over, and they were still at table, when a waiter came in with

a message from a person who was just arrived, and said he wished to see Mr. Hammond on business of importance; at the same time placing a card in his hand.

Mrs. Palmer started and looked at her brother with an inquiring gaze. He answered her silent appeal very briefly, only observing—

“No one you are acquainted with.”

Then, turning to the waiter, said—

“Shew the gentleman into another room, and tell him I am coming directly.”

Michael then rose and went to the window, and stood apparently looking without for a minute or two, but there was deep thought in his eye as he turned round, and, with a glance towards his sister, walked out of the apartment in his most leisurely manner.

On entering the room into which the stranger had been shown, he found, as he expected, a confidential clerk, who had been despatched by Mr. Forster. With feigned composure Mr. Hammond asked the nature of the business that had brought him to London.

It was briefly stated by placing certain papers and cheques in his hands, with a question as to the genuineness of the signature which was attached to each, and purported to be that of Michael Hammond.

The imitation was so good, that for a moment he was staggered in the denial that rose to his lips of all knowledge of the several transactions; for Michael imagined, for a passing second, that the writing must be his own.

He soon, however became aware it was

not so; and a terrible suspicion took possession of his mind. He found from the clerk that the larger cheque had been, with others, honoured at a certain London house; but, on being returned to Holycross, Mr. Forster entertained some doubts in his mind as to their genuineness, which led to the present inquiry.

Michael, suppressing all outward signs of his inward agitation, merely told the clerk to leave all the papers with him, until he had seen or heard from Mr. Palmer; and, in the meantime, to say that he would write to, or see, Mr. Forster in a day or two; and to wait quietly until they had heard from him. That he should remain in London until he had made all necessary inquiries, and thoroughly investigated the whole business.

Alas! for the issue of those inquiries, which Michael continued to follow up with the most painful perseverance! He soon ascertained that Stephen Palmer had presented all these cheques, and received the money for them himself; and, worse than that, a further and very considerable sum had been withdrawn from Miss Newton's property.

This disclosure led to fresh and still more distressing discoveries, whilst Stephen's mysterious and prolonged absence strengthened and confirmed every suspicion into a convincing proof of his guilt.

Miserably, indeed, did it now appear that he had betrayed the confidence his uncle placed in him. He had in fact, for some time past, been speculating deeply, on his own account, in railway

shares, and had surreptitiously abstracted money for that purpose, no doubt intending, when he did so, to replace the amount as soon as he became possessor of the large fortune he already considered his own, excusing himself, meanwhile, to his own conscience by presuming it would be made all right in the end. The end came indeed, but in a very different manner from what he had expected !

The astounding intelligence of the flight of his intended bride completely overthrew every prospect that the future had presented to Stephen Palmer. Love—wealth—reputation—all melted away ! The ruin was as irretrievable as it was unlooked-for and overwhelming. It is true the affection he had once entertained, or fancied he had felt, for Clara Newton, had

gradually cooled down. His heart had room but for one master-passion, and that was avarice. It blighted and destroyed all that came in contact with it. The shock was in the present instance tremendous, and Stephen's brain almost reeled under the severity of it. Who shall attempt to depict the fearful struggles that afterwards took place in that ill-regulated mind? His longing desire was to pursue the faithless Clara, and inflict some signal chastisement on the abhorred partner of her flight, who, worse than all, was now the actual possessor of her fortune.

That thought was torture. The desire of revenge, acting upon the cupidity inherent in his nature, urged him on to a course of conduct as reckless as it was infamous.

He was now obliged to act with a rapidity that nothing but the extreme urgency of the case could have induced, or that could have given the slightest hopes of success to his scheme.

Before the tidings of his own terrible change of prospects had reached the ear of certain houses of business, he had managed, by forging his uncle's name, to withdraw some large sums, which he had had the opportunity of placing out, for his own and his future wife's advantage.

By this step he secured a rich prize out of that wealth he had so long coveted ; and with these dearly-bought spoils, he made his way, with the utmost expedition, to Liverpool.

For the purpose of effectually baffling all inquiry and pursuit, he assumed the

disguise of a woman, and reached the place he sought unsuspected, and in safety. His mercantile knowledge and experience were of great use to him when he arrived, and by the time that the family at Holycross were settled at the hotel in Berners Street, the wretched Stephen had embarked on board a vessel bound to Mexico.

It was a chance circumstance that gave him an opportunity of procuring a passage in that ship, but Stephen seized it with avidity, as its destination suited him well, and the unsettled state of that country afforded him a wider field of enterprise for employing the money he had brought with him, without any risk of recognition or detection.

For a short time after his departure, all clue seemed to be lost as to his pro-

ceedings and destination. During that time, Michael employed every means that could be devised to ascertain where his guilty nephew had betaken himself, with the large sums of which he had become so fraudulently the master ; and before long he received intelligence which served to put him in possession of most of the facts already recorded.

By degrees these particulars of Stephen's crime were of necessity communicated to his wretched mother ; but she was for some time left in uncertainty as to whether he had succeeded in making his escape from the country. This doubt was a great aggravation to her distress, as she could not tell, and dare not ask, what course of proceeding her brother might adopt towards him in case of his discovery. It

was, in fact, a painful position for the brother and sister to be placed in; and whilst things were thus pending, Lillian hardly knew between the two how best to comfort and propitiate. She however devoted herself, as far as she was able, to support Mrs. Palmer. It was, indeed, a hard task, for there was nothing to be urged in extenuation of such a flagrant case of fraud. His mother, nevertheless, constantly asserted that Stephen had been driven by desperation to the course he had pursued—that he knew not what he had done, or was doing—in fact, that all the world was guilty but him.

At times the unhappy woman broke down; though in general she strove to repress her emotion, and to retain a species of dignified and unnatural com-

posure ; but when that gave way, she was attacked with the same kind of violent hysterical seizure from which she had suffered before leaving Holycross. After these fits (which were attended with more or less excitement), she sank into a fearful state of bodily and mental depression ; and it was at these times that Lillian's kindness and attention were most requisite. She also endeavoured to soften Michael's feelings, by describing to him the intensity of his sister's sufferings.

Mr. Hammond was generally absent the whole day ; and when at the hotel, very seldom came into the room which Mrs. Palmer occupied with Lillian, when she was well enough to leave her sleeping apartment ; nor did he ever appear to wish to see his sister alone.

One day, however, he yielded to Lillian's entreaties, promising to remain with Mrs. Palmer whilst she took the opportunity of visiting Fanny Newton.

The sudden and somewhat unexpected sight of Michael startled his sister, and almost brought on one of her hysterical attacks; but with determined resolution she got the better of her weakness and gasped out—

“Forgive him, Michael!—forgive my wretched boy!—he was not himself when he acted as he has done!—he was mad!—driven mad by that wicked girl's unprincipled conduct! Think of all he must have suffered, and forgive him, brother—he was mad!—quite mad!”

“Yes; no doubt he was mad!” said Michael; “all great criminals are. But

there was method in his madness, at all events. Well, well, don't cry so—we are all mad on some point or other!"

"Not you, brother," interrupted Mrs. Palmer.

"Yes, indeed—I have been mad to have trusted him as I have done; and that weak girl was mad to accept him as her husband; and you were mad not to have seen what was going on before your eyes."

"Ah! I wish I *had* seen and known more!" sobbed Mrs. Palmer; "but how could I suspect such falseness and wickedness?—and in the girl, too, who was so soon to become my son's wife? I must indeed have been mad to have dreamed of such a thing!"

"And yet," returned Mr. Hammond,

"you were mad enough to suspect and accuse your brother's wife of greater falsehood, of worse wickedness?"

"I was! I was!" exclaimed Mrs. Palmer, with a sudden pang of remorseful recollection; "but Lillian, I know, will not be vindictive; and I pray you, brother Michael, to be merciful, and to forgive my son!"

"Forgive! Ay!" said Michael, "you had better say *give* at once! When a man has robbed you of some thirty thousand pounds, that is your meaning of the word *forgive*—is it not, Mrs. Palmer?"

"Brother Michael!—Mr. Hammond!" exclaimed Mrs. Palmer, making an effort to kneel at his feet, which Michael quickly perceived and prevented, placing his sister

in her chair, and holding her firmly there, whilst she continued at intervals, “Pray hear me! All I ask is time—do not take any legal proceedings against my son!—have patience with me, and I will pay you all—yes, all! Take everything I possess in the meantime, and I will endeavour to satisfy you.”

“There! there!” that is enough; “pray stop, Sybil—Mrs. Palmer!” exclaimed Michael, impatiently, “who has ever asked you for all you possess?—you are very welcome to give it me when I do. But do sit quietly there, like a rational woman, and hear me out, without interrupting me—will you?”

“Indeed, Michael,” returned Mrs. Palmer, meekly, “I am but too ready to listen to anything you wish to say.”

"I only desire, then, to assure you, Mrs. Palmer, that I would give twice thirty thousand pounds could I restore the good name to your son that he has forfeited. Ay," continued Michael, with a sudden burst of unexpected feeling, "and more than that, if he would have come to me and asked me to save him; but it is too late now. I have done all I can. I have taken all the responsibilities upon myself—so far your son is safe. As the guardian and trustee of Clara Newton, I am responsible for all that belonged to her. I shall restore it all to her; the loss will be mine alone."

Mrs. Palmer looked and felt bewildered at this statement of her brother's intentions; but he took the trouble of explaining all and every circumstance more fully,

and in detail, to her ; and also informed her he had good reason to believe, from certain inquiries he had made, that her son had sailed for Mexico—but, as far as he was concerned, he was safe, wherever his destination might be ; that he should seek no redress for the wrong he had done him—he left him to the punishment which his own conscience might bring upon him ; that he was not likely to be disturbed with his ill-gotten gains in that far distant country.

“ And now,” said Michael, in conclusion, “ it does not seem that either you or I can do anything more in this most unfortunate business. I would not speak to you in the first heat of feeling caused by the knowledge of Stephen’s treachery ; but now, having fully weighed and inves-

tigated every circumstance connected with it, and drawn my own conclusions, and resolved upon my own mode of action, and made you acquainted with everything, all I now beg is, that the subject may be dropped for ever—that the name of Stephen Palmer, which is become a disgrace to the families to which he belongs, be no more named, at least to me. My pecuniary losses are very heavy; they will require time and much careful consideration on my part, as well as serious retrenchment, to repair; but that is a small part of what his conduct has made me suffer, for after all I find money is not all and everything in this world. However," continued Michael, abruptly, "there is no occasion to say more on such a subject. I know we must all *think* more; but I beg

to *hear* no further allusion to it. As his mother, I pity you most sincerely, for no blame attaches to you in this business; although I am not as ignorant as you may suppose of your culpable conduct, together with your son, in another affair. But all that is now past and gone, and I will try not to mention it again; and you, on your part, must bear up as well as you can under existing circumstances. I have done everything for your relief that is possible; so we will say no more. I wish you to prepare to return with me to Holycross House to-morrow."

CHAPTER IX.



HUS was this miserable transaction disposed of, as far as might be ; and the small family party left London for their country home.

It was the middle of January ; bleak, cold, and wretched, was the weather—hardly less so were the hearts of some of that party. Michael Hammond, little sensitive as he might be, was deeply hurt by what had occurred—plundered and pillaged where he had trusted so implicitly—his model

man of business, and pet nephew, lost to him for ever; a disgrace to his name and family, and never more to be seen or mentioned by or amongst them.

The mother's sad feelings may too easily be imagined, as she looked out, with heavy eyes and heart, at the old familiar scenes, where that face and form so dear to her would never more be visible, and from which she was parted, with a desolation of separation far worse than that of death itself.

Lillian, too, felt sad. The long and protracted absence of her husband weighed upon her heart, which was unusually depressed from the mournful scenes she had lately witnessed. Still she had her boy to comfort her, and she alone, of the melancholy trio, felt some sensation of

joyful anticipations as the carriage drew up to the gloomy-looking mansion in the market-place at Holycross.

It was more than a month since they had left home, and the dismal Christmas had come and gone in London, unmarked by any one save Lillian, who fondly thought it was a step that brought her nearer to the time of Gabriel's return. She sprang from the carriage, and passed quickly through the large cold hall, and soon was at the top of the stairs that led to her child's apartment.

Michael followed with a slow though firm gait, whilst Mrs. Palmer walked with an uneven step, her whole frame trembling and shaking with cold, and with nervous agitation.

It was one of Michael's fancies, or pre-

judices, that stove-heat in a house was unwholesome, as he declared it made the inhabitants susceptible to cold, and more likely to suffer from it on going out of doors. It therefore happened that when the travellers entered the house, they encountered an atmosphere little less bitter than that they quitted without. There was something particularly depressing in this chilly home reception; and though Michael passed on unflinchingly, his sister shivered, and complained audibly.

"Come! come!" said he, impatiently, as they reached the sitting-room. "I think we may bear a little cold after all we have gone through since we left home. Come, Mrs. Palmer, you must exert yourself, and not make such a fuss about trifles."

Mr. Hammond spoke sharply, as was

generally the case when the annoyance lay deeper than the cause which appeared on the surface, and he was probably vexed in observing the melancholy alteration in his sister, which her present querulous manner and mode of speech betokened—so changed from the quiet self-command which had formerly characterized all her words and actions.

She looked round as she entered the sitting-room, and almost stumbled up to the fire-place, and was on the point of screaming out, when her eye fell on the vacant place, so often occupied in former days by her son, and where a book still lay which he was in the frequent habit of referring to. Michael's words arrested her attention—happily the cutting coldness of them fell with a bracing effect on her

sinking heart; a single sentence of kindness would have overcome her at that moment. In the present instance the fountain of her tears dried up—the spring of grief was frozen—and Sybil Palmer felt, if she was to retain her place in her brother's household, his wishes and comfort must be consulted as heretofore; the deep shadow of her own grief must not presume to cast its reflection, where it never would be tolerated, on Michael's hearth and home.

The wretched mother made a miserable pretence of stirring up the fire, and remarked to her brother that the cold had quite upset her, but she should be better for a little warmth and rest.

"This room is warm enough," said Michael, testily; "we can't expect the

hall in January to feel like July. Now, then, let us have the letters and papers in ; there is a fortnight's accumulation, I suppose."

The letters had not been forwarded to London, owing to the uncertainty of the time of their return for the preceding week or two.

Mrs. Palmer cowered over the blaze, and observed, endeavouring to show some interest in her brother's remark, that she supposed Lillian and he would find letters from the West Indies—that she "thought there was a mail due."

At that time the servant entered, bringing the lamp with him, for it was nearly five o'clock ; he let down the curtains also, and the room, under the influence of fire and lights, began to look cheerful ;

but, oh! the desolation within the mother's heart! She sat still, however, and Mr. Hammond ordered his letters and papers to be brought to him from his own room. He possibly guessed something of his sister's state of mind; and though he would, on principle, suppress all demonstration of feeling on her part, or of sympathy on his own, still, no doubt, he was desirous of giving her the support of his presence that evening, and, instead of retiring as usual to his own room, sent for his letters to open and read upstairs.

The letters and the papers were brought, with some also that had arrived for Mrs. Palmer during her absence. "Mrs. Gabriel's," it was said, "were taken to her own apartments."

Mrs. Palmer leaned back in her chair, without opening hers. On the contrary, she appeared to dread the sight of any letters, and turned her head away from the table on which the servant had placed them.

Michael adjusted his glasses and the light of the lamp, and began methodically to open his despatches of different shapes and sizes.

"No," he observed at last, as if in answer to his sister's remark made some quarter of an hour previous; "no, there will be no letters this mail—I see the packet is lost! It is a terrible business!" continued Michael, in an unmoved tone—"here, you can read it—so near land, too! That tremendous gale, you remember, on the 15th—all hands went down!"

"How very dreadful!" said Mrs. Palmer, with white quivering lips, and her thoughts meanwhile following another vessel at the mercy of the wild waves, that same fearful night, with a sickening dread that it might also have met its doom; and most justly so, for it was freighted with her guilty son, and the wages of his iniquity. She turned suddenly from her own thoughts, and asked her brother, with a strange composure, what was the name of the West Indian packet lost off the Scilly Isles.

"The *Nautilus*," said Michael; "and I have no doubt there were important despatches on board her for me. We shall not hear now from Gabriel till the next."

Michael then turned to take up some

other papers, which lay near, and in so doing his eyes fell on the letters directed to his sister, and on which the light of the lamp was cast brightly.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "by good luck, I see Gabriel has written to you by an earlier packet—look! You must open your letter, Mrs. Palmer, and tell us what he is doing."

His sister mechanically obeyed. She glanced over her letter, and then attempted to speak. The noise she made attracted Michael's attention from one which he was himself deeply studying at the time.

"Well, what does he say? It does not look very long, at all events. Can't you read it to me, or shall I save you the trouble?"

Mrs. Palmer glanced up with a terrified look and distended eyes. The paper in her hand shook and quivered as Michael took it, and hastily read—

“ MY DEAR SYBIL,

“ Your letter has just reached me. I cannot say I fully understand its import, for you write enigmatically; however, one thing seems clear, and that is, you wish, in all kindness, I am sure, to warn me of some possible trouble or annoyance befalling my precious wife in my absence, and against which you imply that my presence *alone* can shield her. It is enough!—such an intimation is a summons for me—all other considerations must and shall defer to it. I will say no more at present, but shall take my

passage home in the *Nautilus*, which sails next week. Till then, adieu!

“GABRIEL.”

Michael read it word for word slowly, as if he sought the sense, and could not master it. A mist, too, swam before his eyes, and a horrible sensation, as if of nightmare, crept all over him. But he stood by the table confronting his sister, whilst she, with a straining fixed look on his face, seemed vainly endeavouring to speak ; but though the parched lips opened and closed, they emitted no sound. At length some words hissed slowly from between Michael’s closed teeth. They were—

“This is your doing, then, Mrs. Palmer !”

Too true, indeed it was ! She had now

her granted wish, and Stephen's also, of Gabriel's premature return from his unfinished mission to the West Indies.

Alas! for the fulfilment of such unholy desires! The fruit of them in the present instance was indeed like that of the apples by the Dead Sea—bitter, bitter, and most unpalatable to the taste—cinders and ashes in that dry mouth!

"I—I could not help it!" at last gasped out the wretched woman.

"You could—you know you could!" said Michael, in the same constrained unnatural tone of voice. "Woman! you have killed your brother! Gabriel's blood lies at your door!"

Was it to be wondered at that that already so deeply stricken spirit was laid low by these words? Enough to kill one

whose nerves were not unstrung like those of the miserable woman to whom they were addressed. She sank in a quivering heap upon the floor, and Michael, with a shuddering gesture, passed by her prostrate form, and sent her maid to her assistance.

The fearful intelligence had then to be conveyed, as best it might, to the poor bereaved wife and widow. Vain, indeed, would any attempt be to depict the depth of that desolation into which she was so suddenly plunged. Lillian could hardly be made to comprehend why and wherefore, at that unexpected time, her unfortunate husband was on his way home in that doomed ship. The whole affair was as incomprehensible to her as it was awful and overwhelming.

Michael himself was hardly less affected by the startling catastrophe. A new and oppressing idea took possession of his imagination, which caused him to accuse both his sister and himself of being the destroyers of their younger brother's life ; suggesting that he had sent him out on this fatal errand, and that she had recalled him, and Gabriel had perished in consequence.

It was a morbid feeling, no doubt, and very unlike those generally entertained by the practical matter-of-fact man of business. But deep within the recesses of Michael's heart there existed a secret well-spring of attachment to his only brother. The stream which should have issued from this source had been so often checked and well-nigh stifled, that it appeared almost dried

up; but now, at the first tidings of this calamity, it gushed out pure and bright to the surface of that arid soil, purifying and enriching it, as Michael felt and owned, he would have given all the gold he possessed to have brought that brother back to life.

For some time after he received the mournful news, he seemed quite prostrated by it, and could hardly be roused to use any exertion, or even to notice what was going on around him. It was then that Lillian, becoming aware of Michael's state, rose up, in the midst of her own bitter grief, to try to comfort and support him.

With all her natural gentleness, Lillian possessed that strength of mind which can alone be derived from a firm and habitual reliance on a merciful and over-

ruling Providence, and which now kept her from utterly sinking in this time of severe trial. She was also naturally cheerful and trustful, and, as she strove to pour consolation into Michael's stricken heart, some refreshing drops fell upon her own, whispering of hope she hardly dared to cherish. It suggested that there might be sparing mercy still, even in the midst of this overwhelming trouble; that from the shipwrecked crew some struggling souls might have been rescued, and that her husband might be amongst the number.

This thought, which had, indeed, no foundation to stand upon, was yet a blessed one to Michael; it was but the straw to the drowning wretch, yet he eagerly clutched at it, and revived in

consequence ; it was something tangible to lay hold of. Anything, in fact, was better than to sit still and suffer as he had done. So he declared his intention of following out Lillian's idea, and to lose no time in going up to town, and from thence to the Lands End, should he hear any tidings of the shipwrecked vessel, or her passengers, beyond the fearfnl ones already received.

It cannot be said that the hopes of one or the other of the mourners were very sanguine as to a happy result, yet for a time there seemed a relief from the dull calmness of despair. Lillian, in the meantime, with unselfish charity, devoted herself to the care of her wretched sister-in-law, whose grief and remorse had brought on fresh attacks of her hysterical seizures, which were sometimes so violent

and exhausting as to threaten her life itself.

Mr. Hammond's plans were soon settled, and he sought Lillian, to take leave. It was a mournful and a momentous parting to both. They neither of them dared to speculate upon what might have occurred before their next meeting. It was, indeed, a question of life and death. So there was little said on either side. Lillian strove to support her own fortitude, and that of Michael also. He took her boy in his arms, and, returning him to his mother's, said hastily :

“ There ! there ! whatever happens, this child shall be my heir, he shall inherit all I have to leave, as his father would have done. I have no more to say, for words cannot make my intentions plainer, or my resolve more fixed than it is, and I am

not a man given to make speeches. Now, my dear child, good-bye, and God bless you, and speed me in my undertaking. We shall soon meet again."

Michael went his way, and Lillian was left alone in that melancholy mansion, to bear her sorrow as she best might, and to try and solace that of Mrs. Palmer.

Day by day the latter became worse, and Lillian's whole sympathy was strongly interested in her behalf. A regular nurse had to be engaged to help, with the assistance of her own maid—and that nurse was Mrs. Salmons. Often when Mrs. Palmer's wandering and unsettled eyes rested on her familiar face, did her unhinged mind bring back with tormenting exactness the scene of that night when with Stephen she invaded her brother's secret reposi-

tories; and then did she recapitulate the whole proceeding with unsteady voice to Lillian, and implore her to seek for the pin her son had dropped amongst its hidden treasure.

The family doctor at last thought Mrs. Palmer so much worse, and mind and body both in such imminent danger, that he suggested the necessity of having further advice, and begged that Mr. Hammond might be written to, and requested to send down some medical man, in whose opinion he might have full confidence; or else allow him to do so on his own responsibility.

Lillian, however, suggested that possibly Mr. Hammond had already left London. Her own anxious hopes and wishes tended in that direction; but she expressed

her own unqualified opinion that there ought to be no delay in Mrs. Palmer's case, and she empowered Doctor Davis to summon further medical advice immediately.

It was done, and the same morning Doctor Davis announced to Lillian that he had written to the London physician whom he had already named to her, and unless sent for by her in the meantime, should not visit his patient again until the evening, when he intended meeting his friend at the station, and hoped to bring him with him directly after to see Mrs. Palmer.

Lillian having received all necessary instructions, in the meantime took her accustomed place in the invalid's chamber. She was seldom permitted the comfort of

indulging her grief and anxiety in private. Mrs. Palmer made the most constant demands upon her time and patience. She would often send for Lillian, if absent for a short time, and then in her half-conscious state, with the fear of death before her, would entreat her to stay by her, and assure her of her forgiveness for all the evil she had ever thought or intended against her and her poor brother Gabriel.

Lillian's distress at such times was very great, and there was no escape from the repetition of these scenes. In common humanity she could neither refuse to go to her, nor relax in her endeavours to soothe the unhappy woman. She could not close her ears and heart to her harrowing appeals.

So Lillian braced up her poor, aching, sinking heart, and went about doing all the good she could to her enemy; and literally it must have been heaping coals of fire upon Mrs. Palmer's head, whilst she sought in every way to ease her pains of body and mind.

Poor Lillian! there was none to care for her, meanwhile. She who had once been so tenderly watched over, and shielded from every trouble and annoyance; and he who would have laid down his life for her, or shed his heart's blood to protect her from the least evil, was now far away, perhaps for ever removed from all knowledge of, or participation in, her earthly cares and sorrows. His freed spirit already rejoicing in its unseen though blest abode, whilst its mortal

tenement was reposing beneath the deep waters of that treacherous ocean from whose depths she might never more hope to recover that which was once so precious to her sight.

Lillian sat thus musing on her woe, a few evenings after Michael had left his home, by the bedside of the then unconscious sufferer. She had done all that lay in her power to soothe the perturbed spirit ; she had pointed out to her the only way to peace and comfort, and whilst so doing, the blessed words had fallen like dew on her own weary heart, refreshing and invigorating it to bear up against its accumulated load of sorrow.

Mrs. Palmer had fallen asleep more quietly to the music of Lillian's gentle tones and comforting words, and she re-

mained watching the unhappy woman until she sank into a calm slumber.

Lillian herself was almost worn out, and had nearly dropped asleep also, when the nurse came from the next room, saying, in a low whisper,

"The medical gentlemen, ma'am, please, are just arrived. I heard them in the hall below. Will you please step down and see them first, and I will come and fetch them up when the poor lady is awake and ready to receive them?"

Lillian listlessly acquiesced. She was in the daily habit of meeting Doctor Davis, and said she would go down and see him first, and he might bring up his friend, the London physician, when he pleased, there was no occasion for her to see him.

The nurse accordingly returned to her

patient, and Lillian wrapped her shawl around her, and leaving the sick-chamber, descended the wide oak staircase.

It was getting dusk, and the lamp was lighted in the hall, when she entered its freezing precincts. No one was about, but there was a light in the dining-room, and the door stood ajar. She went up to it and pushed it gently open. The fire had been kept up in that room in expectation of the two medical men's arrival during the evening or night.

Lillian just looked in, intending to call Dr. Davis out to speak to him, not wishing at that time to see his friend also. She then perceived that only one of the gentlemen was there; and as there was no light except that reflected by the fire, she felt uncertain which it might be, and

therefore hesitated a moment at the door before entering, then stopping, asked softly—

“Is it you, Dr. Davis?”

The gentleman within was pacing up and down the room with a rapid and somewhat impatient step, and, until spoken to, seemed unaware that anyone was near.

He turned quickly, however, at the first sound of Lillian’s voice. With one step he was at her side, and ere she could turn away, his arms were round her, and his words, amidst a shower of warm kisses, breathed forth—

“My darling!—my love!—my Lillian!”

But they fell unheeded on her ears, for Lillian had fainted in her husband’s arms.

Who can describe the moment of returning consciousness, when the happy wife revived to the trembling realization of her husband's safety and restoration, and her own exceeding bliss? Such joy as could only be equalled by the depths of the misery that had preceded it! What a strange dreamy sense of overpowering thankfulness and love and gratitude filled all Lillian's heart and soul! The happiness of the long-divided and re-united pair was for a time too intense for words. In murmured words, in mute caresses, the first fleeting hour of their meeting passed all unheeded away. At length the words became sentences, and they talked once more together, and felt a waking sense of their felicity, and asked each other how it had come to pass.

"I returned with my brother," said Gabriel, in answer to Lillian's first inquiry; "he left me in this room, where I promised to remain, whilst he went to prepare you for my return."

"And I," said Lillian, "missed him from being in Mrs. Palmer's room; whilst he, no doubt, went to find me in my own. And now tell me, my dearest, about that fearful shipwreck. Surely you were never really lost at sea?"

"Very nearly, my darling. We suffered tremendously between Ushant and the Scilly Isles, and at last struck upon the rocks of that coast. Some of us made our escape, and were picked up by a foreign boat, and taken to the French coast; that was the reason we were not heard of before. My brother came down

to the Land's End, and set all inquiries on foot, and at length obtained tidings, which were prosecuted with all the energy which money could impart, to insure a happy issue. He soon discovered our place of refuge, and you see the result, dearest. Ah! surely Michael is the best brother that ever man was blessed with!"

"I think I could name another quite as good," returned Lillian, looking fondly in her husband's face.

The news of Gabriel's return came also with a healing as well as happy influence on Mrs. Palmer's shaken nerves and sinking frame. The intelligence so far revived her that she was soon able to dispense with medical attendance, and the renewed kindness of her brother Michael contributed to perfect that re-

covery which Gabriel's restoration had commenced, and ere long she was able to join the re-united family party downstairs. She was greatly softened and improved by her late experience, but never entirely regained her former strength either of mind or body. With returning health, however, her former tormenting disquietude respecting Stephen and his actual position and whereabouts again assailed her; for he, although so deeply sinning, and contemned by all around, was yet the dearest object that the world contained to his mother's devoted heart. It was a grievous trial, indeed, and one that was almost a sufficient punishment for all Mrs. Palmer's past sins towards others. Feel what she might, however, her present sorrow must be supported

alone; and what grief can be equal to a mother's who is aware that all the world stands aloof from the beloved though erring one!—that his name is a by-word, his memory a disgrace! Poor Mrs. Palmer felt all this more acutely than any one knowing the woman's nature would have given her credit for. She had indeed set up an idol, and it was cast down from its proud pedestal, shattered and defaced. Still the mother gathered up the broken fragments, and sheltered and cherished them in the secret tabernacle of her heart. At length, through some unknown channel, she received a letter from her son—at least it was posted by some private hand from London.

How her spirit revived at the sight of that well-known and loved writing, whilst

her whole being rejoiced in the conviction that he still remembered his mother, and turned to her recollection in his far-distant home. She felt, now she could receive tidings of his welfare, that he was no longer dead to her—that life was henceforth no more a blank to her!

It was a strange letter ; there was little to re-assure or gratify a mother's heart in its perusal. It showed, however, the identity of the man, and that, in spite of all that had befallen him, Stephen was still the same, for his cool and calculating spirit had not deserted him. He spoke of himself as a deeply injured man, one, in fact, more sinned against than sinning, and as having been compelled to the course he had adopted in consequence of the baseness and ill-conduct of others.

He spoke of Clara and her perfidy in terms of such bitterness and ill-feeling against her and her husband, as made his mother almost rejoice that the same country did not contain them both. He spoke of her behaviour in regard to him as having had such a ruinous effect upon himself and all his prospects, that he was driven to act as he had done. She had by her falseness deprived him of wealth, reputation, and home, for he could never have shown himself again in Holycross after what had occurred.

He went on to say he regretted the grief which the loss of his money would occasion his uncle; but he might take comfort, as it was in fact no robbery on his part—he hoped to turn it to profitable account yet; and that being the case, at

some future day Michael might receive his own again with interest. In that light it was but a loan, let others regard it as they might.

Much more did Stephen write to his mother, whom no doubt from past experience he regarded as something in the light of an accomplice; or, if not exactly so, in the present case, at least, of such a congenial disposition as could enter into all he advanced, and view it in an approving spirit.

As she read on, her mind (now much weakened) became almost confused and bewildered between her sense of right and wrong, and she actually ceased to think him so very much to blame—in fact, the horror of the sin was almost swal-

lowed up in her love and compassion for the sinner.

The letter concluded with begging her, if ever she wearied of the grudging hospitality doled out to her at Holycross House, to leave it and come at once to him, as he would then let her know where to find him ; and if she would bring her money with her, he could find a very profitable investment for it.

Mrs. Palmer had fortunately neither personal nor mental strength requisite for such an undertaking in all its bearings. She was, therefore, forced to forego the hope of indulging her longing desire of seeing her son once more, and obliged to satisfy her heart with constantly writing to, and occasionally hearing from him ;

and in that occupation and expectation her mind grew easier, and her spirit became more calm and cheerful.

If either of her brothers knew or suspected anything of her communication with her absent son, nothing ever was said; and Mrs. Palmer concealed all trace that might have led to a knowledge of his actual place of abode with a jealous and not unnatural care.

Michael was never heard but once to allude to him, and that was in reply to some information that Gabriel had received from a West Indian correspondent, which led to a belief that Stephen, under a false name, was the head of a new flourishing commercial house at Vera Cruz, expressing at the same time his incredulity and astonishment at such a bold venture on Ste-

phen's part, after what he had done.

"Ah!" said Michael, "depend upon it, our worthy nephew is the man you suppose. Yes; his fall was a signal one; but let the height be ever so great, he is one that will always alight upon his feet."

And so it proved

CHAPTER X.



HE first event of any peculiar interest which occurred to break the quiet monotony of the days at Holycross House was the return of Clara and her husband, Captain Linwood, to that neighbourhood.

There was some awkwardness in the first meeting between the runaway heiress and her former guardian. Nor did Clara venture to present herself before him until she had, through Lillian, obtained due permission to do so. On that oc-

casion the interview took place at her own house, Elmswell Park.

Mr. Hammond would not task his sister's returning strength of mind and body to ask her to receive Clara at Holycross. There were too many memories involved in such a place of meeting to make it pleasant at that time to any of those most concerned in it.

Michael did not exhibit any of the apprehended displeasure, which he had never entertained against Mrs. Linwood. Still there were recollections enough connected with her former residence in his family, and manner of quitting it, to make him look rather more grave than usual, when he, accompanied by Lillian and Gabriel, entered the house of his former ward.

Clara Linwood received them very

gracefully, with a charming mixture of diffidence and pleasure that was very becoming; but her natural timidity made her cling especially to Lillian as her protectress on the occasion; whilst she almost drew back from Mr. Hammond, whom at the same time she was heartily glad to see once more.

"Come, my dear," said he, taking both her hands in his, and looking kindly at the blushing and averted countenance, "look me straight in the face at once, and then it will be over. I used to tell you, if a disagreeable thing has to be done, to get it over as soon as possible, and make an end of it. Come, I am glad to see, as far as I can judge, that you are looking so well and so happy."

"Ah! happy! yes, indeed I am, my dear sir. And so I am to see you once more, though I fear you hardly think it, after all—all—the trouble."

"We will say no more about this," replied Michael, in a grave, kind voice. "What is past and gone can't be recalled; and you must forgive me if I say that much of the trouble, as you call it, would have been avoided had you shewn a little more resolution, and faced the difficulty at first. When you found you had made a mistake, if you would have had the boldness to own it, and abide the consequences, you might have saved a great deal of sorrow and misconception to some, and perhaps," added he, in a lower tone, "of crime and lasting remorse to others."

Clara owned almost with tears that

such might have been the case, and yet intimated the dread she felt of being kept to her engagement, should she have openly declared her change of feeling, adding, "I know I was very wrong, but I had not courage to do otherwise. You must forgive the weakness of my nature, which compelled me to act as I did."

"Ah! cunning is said to be the wisdom of the weak," replied Michael. "I am sorry you should have had recourse to it; but you were not the only one to blame, so we will say no more about it."

"Except," remonstrated her husband, who had drawn near to support his wife, "except, my dear sir, you must please to remember that in love, as in war, all stratagems are allowable, so we must crave a full and free pardon on that score."

Michael looked from one to the other of the young couple before him. They had both been favourites of his formerly, and an expression of kind interest softened his hard features, as he extended a hand to each.

"Well, as far as I am concerned, I forgive you both for the trick you played me; but I wish, my dear," said he expressly to Clara, "you would promise me to be more straightforward and courageous in any difficult transactions henceforth—eh?"

Clara only answered by a timid appealing glance to her husband, who spoke for her.

"I promise and vow, my dear sir, for my sweet little wife, to be henceforth the shield that shall guard and protect her in all cases of difficulty and doubt and

danger. She shall want neither strength nor courage whilst I live to act for her."

"Very well," said Michael, "I suppose I must be content to take all your good qualities by proxy now; and as you seem to have got some one to speak as well as act for you, I shall say no more to you on the subject, and will only wish you many years' enjoyment of the many blessings with which you are surrounded."

A longer observation of Clara and her husband seemed to satisfy Mr. Hammond that his former ward had this time chosen well for her own happiness; and he enjoyed frequent opportunities of doing so, as the young couple took up their permanent residence at Elmswell Park, and Clara never appeared to have the least occasion to regret the change she had

made in the selection of the master of the place and all her possessions.

After a time Gabriel and Lillian began to feel again the wish of having some home of their own; and it was Mrs. Palmer now who was most opposed to such a proceeding on their part, and most desirous of retaining them as constant inmates of the old house at Holy-cross.

Michael, however, said but little on the subject to induce them to remain entirely; he even appeared to agree with Gabriel, when he at last mentioned the subject of their leaving him, after their prolonged visit at his house.

"I daresay," said he, "young people generally find it pleasantest to have a home of their own. I know you and

Lillian are very kind, and perfectly accommodating; but it can't be the same thing to you living here, as it would be in a separate establishment. You have your own friends and your own engagements, and can't be expected to forego them all for us; and we can't do the same as you do, nor do we wish it, especially now. So say no more about it, but follow out your own plans, whatever they may be."

Thus permitted and encouraged to move, Gabriel told his wife he intended to make fresh inquiries of Henry Linwood, as to whether he still intended to let the Lodge; and if so, if he would still take them as his tenants there.

"I know the house is empty," said Lillian, as she and Gabriel talked the

matter over; "and we may be quite sure neither Clara nor Captain Linwood has any idea of ever living there themselves, so I think we may look upon their taking us as tenants as settled, especially after proceeding as far as we once did towards taking the place."

"Yes," returned Gabriel; "now we have decided to go, and Michael seems willing, and Sybil satisfied that we should do so, there can be no doubt of our being able to secure our dear old home."

Thus Gabriel and Lillian thought and reasoned, and set off for Elmswell Park in the full expectation of their plan meeting with the full concurrence of their friends there. They found Clara and her husband both at home, and hastened to

lay before them the subject of their wishes and intentions as regarded their former residence at Linwood Lodge.

To their surprise, Mr. and Mrs. Linwood exchanged a hasty glance, then began both to speak together, saying—

“How unlucky!” and then simultaneously stopped in a sort of embarrassment, which made Lillian draw back, and Gabriel remark with his usual composure—

“If there is any change in your intention of letting the place, of course we must think of something else; but I fancied, from what Lillian said, it was still to be had.”

“And so it *was*,” replied Clara, “till a very short time ago. Lillian is quite right; and there is no one that Henry and I should rejoice so much in having

there as Lillian and yourself; but——”

“But what?” asked Gabriel, quietly.
“Is it let? I wish you would let us
have the refusal, if it is not.”

Clara said no more, but got behind
her “shield,” and looked up at him to
take up the matter. Captain Linwood
understood, and came to his wife’s
rescue.

“If it had been to let, my dear fel-
low, you may be sure there is no one
would be half so acceptable to me and
to Clara as yourself and Mrs. Hammond;
but during the time it was so, truth to
say, I believed that you both had taken
up your permanent abode at the old
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up your permanent abode at the old
House in the market-place. So I changed
my mind about letting the place, and
have decided upon selling it.”

"Selling the Lodge!" exclaimed Lillian, in an almost involuntary tone of reproach.
"Oh! how can you bear to part with the place for good and all?"

"I hope," replied Henry, "that I have parted with it for good; but you must not blame me. You know we cannot live at two places at once, and Clara's inclination tends, as you well know, to her present home. Nor have I any expectation of ever inducing her to move to my less eligible abode—so—so—the fact is, I have been persuaded to sell my 'own place,' such as it is; and I hope"—looking at Lillian with a smile—"you will forgive me for doing so."

"Oh! yes! of course," replied she, feeling rather hurt and disappointed.

"You have found a purchaser, then,

Linwood?" asked Gabriel, after a moment's pause.

"Yes, I have," returned he; "but things are not quite settled yet, so you must excuse my saying any more about it at present."

"Oh! certainly," replied Gabriel; "and you must forgive our having troubled you with this application, as we were quite ignorant of your intentions."

And there the matter rested; and Clara called Lillian's attention to a letter she was writing to her aunt, Mrs. Riccardo, of whom she had not been forgetful in the midst of her wedded happiness and prosperity. She even declared she owed a large debt of gratitude to that self-complacent lady, for having been the means of delaying her intended marriage with

Stephen Palmer, and thereby, unwittingly, doing her the greatest service, by giving her time to know her own mind, and see something of the real character of her lover, and thereby saving her from the dreadful fate of becoming his wife.

In the depths of her gratitude, Clara had written to invite Mrs. Riccardo, as well as Fanny Newton, to stay with her, and had even included the signor in her invitations, though she devoutly hoped he would refuse to come.

The invitation was, however, promptly accepted. Fanny Newton was instructed to write and inform Mrs. Linwood, that, as soon as the Stapletons returned home, it was the intention of her aunt and the signor to visit them, and that, in the meantime, they would take Elmswell Park

en route there, and therefore the whole party might be expected the following week.

“So you see, Lillian,” said Clara, “we are positively going to have them all. It quite frightens me when I think of the signor roaming loose about here, for nobody knows how long.”

“Come, you must not repent of your invitation already,” said her husband; “you know you can depend upon me to take care of you.”

“Oh! yes,” said Clara, “I am quite resigned; I shall try and support it as well as I can.”

Mrs. Linwood’s good intentions were, however, never destined to be put to the proof. Alas! for the uncertainty of all human plans and projects! Neither the

signor nor his lady ever visited Elmswell Park.

Another summons came for Mrs. Riccardo. After playing the invalid for so many years with so much satisfaction to herself, she was called upon to support the character in earnest.

A day or two before that appointed for her visit to Clara, Mrs. Riccardo was taken seriously ill. Nothing could exceed her alarm and despair when informed of the dangerous tendency of her malady. But in spite of her protestations against the opinion of the medical men who attended her, and the imputation touching the folly and selfishness of those who believed in them, she became rapidly worse.

It was in vain that Fanny Newton,

with affectionate solicitude, sought to warn the unhappy dying woman, and teach her where to turn for comfort at that hour of extremity. Whilst breath and consciousness remained, Mrs. Riccardo refused to admit the idea of danger. It seemed even as if she supposed she could keep death at bay by determining to ignore its evident approach. With faltering tongue she upbraided Fanny for her cruelty in talking to her of her perilous state.

“Ah, it is very well for you who are so well and strong to sit by and tell me I am going to die, but I don’t believe a word you say; and I’m no worse than I have been a hundred times before, when you thought there was nothing the matter with me, so I haven’t much faith in your

opinion; and I think it is very selfish and unfeeling of you, Fanny; so if you can do nothing for me but mope, you had better go and send the signor."

But though repeatedly sent for, the careless husband was seldom to be found in his wife's sick-chamber. It cannot be denied, however, that Mr. Riccardo showed much anxiety at that time about his wife, or rather touching any disposition she might have made, or be induced to make, respecting the property over which she had reserved a full and entire control on her marriage, and of the extent of which he was still in ignorance. He found, on approaching this delicate subject, however, that the bare mention of a will, or of the necessity of settling her worldly affairs, threw the miserable woman into such a state of anger

and excitement, that he abandoned all hope for himself of inducing her to attend to such matters; but contrived at the same time to hint to Fanny Newton the desirability of Madame Riccardo's allowing *his* lawyer to receive any instructions she might be disposed to give about her affairs. After that, the signor, or Monsieur le Comte, as he continued to call himself, took himself out, to beguile the weary hours of his wife's indisposition, with such society and amusement as he could command.

Fanny Newton would gladly have summoned Clara to her dying aunt, would she have permitted it; but it appeared Mrs. Riccardo considered that would have been much the same as signing her own death warrant, so she strictly forbade any such communication being made as might induce

her niece to visit her at that time, declaring also that she felt sure she should be sufficiently recovered to go and see her, as had been proposed, at Elmswell Park.

The rapidly approaching crisis was not to be averted by any of the dying woman's devices. With her heart fixed on earth, and her whole soul bound up in the things of time and sense, she was dragged, as it were, into another world.

Clinging with her expiring efforts to life, shrinking from the approach of death, and protesting against the cruelty of even thinking she was dying, the unhappy woman sank at last under the effects of her malady, even to the last moment refusing to listen to any suggestions that might have given her hope and comfort.

The widowed signor hardly knew at first

whether he was called upon to lament in sincerity, or secretly to rejoice in his emancipation from fetters which had pressed rather heavily upon him at times, but which he bore patiently, trusting they might prove eventually to be well gilded.

It turned out, unhappily for him, that the former sentiment was most suitable to his case, as his wife, in dying, had left him without any pecuniary consolations.

Mrs. Riccardo had good reasons for the reserve she had maintained respecting the disposition of her money affairs. It became known, then, that, a short time previous to her marriage, she had sunk the greater part of her property in an annuity, and that of course ceased with her life.

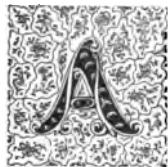
The smaller residue of her fortune, which she had kept in her own hands, had been almost entirely transferred into those of the signor when abroad, and was supposed by his wife to have been expended in the purchase of the ennobling property in Germany.

It is needless to say no such appropriation of the money had ever been really made, and the title assumed by the signor and his lady was as fictitious as the rest of his pretensions. He was, therefore, a considerable loser by his wife's death, having gambled away the money already made over to him, to which he would otherwise most probably have succeeded when that event occurred.

He was, therefore, again compelled to trust to his own resources, and seek his

fortune afresh. No doubt the same facility and easy assurance which has hitherto befriended him will continue to exercise their beneficial effects over his future destiny, and merit like *his*, meet its due reward.

CHAPTER XI.



SHORT time after her aunt's death, Clara wrote to Lillian. They had not met since the day that the unsuccessful application had been made respecting Linwood Lodge.

Clara and her husband had been in town since that time; they had attended Mrs. Riccardo's funeral, and had brought Fanny back with them, to make Elmswell her home henceforth.

The note which Lillian received con-

tained a request which surprised her a little at first, but she acceded to it without hesitation, saying, as she gave the note to Gabriel—

“It is only to ask me to meet her and Fanny at the Lodge this afternoon; she says it is about to be transferred into the new owner’s hands immediately, and she thinks I shall like to take a last look at it as *their* property.”

“Well, I suppose you will go?” said Gabriel; “for I imagine the real motive for making the request is, she does not like to come here to see you, not having courage to meet Mrs. Palmer. So as she and Linwood will be at the Lodge (on business probably), she thinks you will not object to walking over.”

“But I *do* object, Gabriel, although I

am going," said Lillian, very softly. "I have been more vexed and disappointed about losing our old home than I can tell you; and you have not yet heard of anything likely to suit us?"

"Ah! I forgot to tell you, dear. Yes, my brother told me this morning he knew of some place, but was waiting to hear more before he mentioned it to you, but would tell us about it in a day or two."

"Indeed!" replied Lillian, dejectedly. "If it is not near here it will not be of much use, and I know of no place to be let round here. We shall have to live in the town at last, Gabriel!"

"Well, love," returned her husband, kindly, "we can stay here as long as we like, so there is no hurry; and if you

really object to going to the Lodge this afternoon, I will go for you, and make an excuse."

"No, no," returned Lillian, more cheerfully, "though it is rather painful to look one's last at a place I have loved so well, and where I have been so happy, yet I will make the effort, or Clara may be annoyed—so we will both go, and I will take Willie there too."

It was so settled; and at the hour named by Mrs. Linwood, Gabriel and Lillian left the old house, and walking through the plantation, approached their old home—now doubly lost to them—by the well-known garden entrance.

It was a beautiful afternoon in May, and the pretty grounds around the house were in great perfection with the abun-

dant blossoms of lilacs and laburnums, and the many-tinted thorns, which shed their fragrant blossoms on their path as they walked silently and rather sadly along.

Clara, with her husband and cousin Fanny, was waiting to receive them, in the pretty sitting-room which opened into the garden, and standing by the window, so often the resort of the pair who now came to bid their old home farewell.

“So kind of you to come, dear!” said Clara, kissing her friend, and drawing her into the room. “See, the house is fresh furnished from top to bottom, but all the old things have been kept. So the new inhabitants will have a good deal to do in arranging the things.”

“I daresay they will not care for them,”

said Lillian, sadly ; “but you have not told me who our new neighbours are to be ?”

“No, I left that to the purchaser ; and he is here, and ready to give you every information on the subject you may desire. Ah ! here he is !”

“What ! Mr. Hammond ?” exclaimed Lillian, in surprise.

“Is it really you, brother ?” asked Gabriel, as Michael made his appearance at that moment. “To think of your never telling us all this time !”

“I might have had my own reasons for holding my tongue !” returned the new possessor of the Lodge, looking very much satisfied with his purchase. “And now that everything relating to the business is fully settled and concluded, I am

perfectly willing to talk upon the subject, and make the communication I have requested Clara to summon you all to hear!"

Mr. Hammond then turned to Lillian, who stood near, and asked abruptly—

"Well, my dear, do you think the place looks as well since it changed hands as it did before?—do you think you would still like to live here as much as ever?"

"Oh! indeed we should!" exclaimed Lillian, joyfully; "we shall be delighted to be your tenants, if you will have us—shall not we, Gabriel?"

"Well, never mind Gabriel for this once—it is *your* opinion I asked, and yours only; he has nothing to do with it, except as you are concerned."

And then seeing Lillian's look of perplexity and mystification, Mr. Hammond dropped his slightly jesting tone, and taking Lillian's hand, he said with something like emotion—

"I am glad you like your home, my dear child, for it *is* your home henceforth—yes, I mean what I say in its fullest sense. The Lodge is yours henceforth; accept it, I request you, as a gift from myself. I once, in years past, refused to Gabriel the pleasure and power of making, or purchasing, such a home for you as he desired, and you deserved. I now beg to offer this to you, as a proof of my affectionate regard, and as a testimony to my appreciation of your claims upon it."

This was something of a speech for

Michael Hammond to make; but he did not seem to consider it as such—it came from his heart, his head had little to do with it, and he spoke simply as his feelings prompted.

It appeared that Michael had for some time coveted the possession of the Lodge on this account. He desired to make an offering of it to his brother's wife; he found, on investigating the matter, that Captain Linwood, although by no means desirous of selling the Lodge, would yet not refuse him as a purchaser, especially under the idea that Lillian would be the eventual possessor.

Michael did not hesitate to confide all his plans and intentions to Clara and her husband, and on that day everything had been finally arranged.

Nothing could exceed the feeling of satisfaction that generally prevailed when Mr. Hammond presented the Lodge, as his own gift, to his brother's wife, for her own individual property, to have, and to hold, and bequeath, as she should see fit, her husband having no share whatever in the possession.

But who was so glad and happy on that occasion as that husband? Who felt so deeply gratified and sensible of this proof of his brother's estimation of the wife he loved so well, as Gabriel Hammond.

A very short time elapsed before Lilian and her husband moved into their new home, which they then took possession of, with a sense of domestic com-

fort and independence which they had hardly ever realized before ; and it may be added that a grateful sense of the kindness of the donor was amongst the most vivid of the happy feelings they expressed.

Soon after this the Stapletons returned from abroad, and Lillian rejoiced in seeing her sister Agnes and her husband after their long separation. They were amongst their earliest visitors at the Lodge, and great was the satisfaction expressed by Lady Stapleton in finding Lillian in actual possession of so charming a little place of her own, and her merits at last so fully recognised by her husband's family.

The long vexed mortgage question was by that time happily settled. Clara, by

her marriage with Henry Linwood, was become, as Lady Stapleton graciously declared, a species of connexion of their own. It was therefore doubly grateful to her to receive any favour from her hands. There was still, however, sufficient pecuniary embarrassment remaining in the Stapleton affairs to make it a subject of rejoicing to Agnes and Sir Arthur when Michael Hammond, at Gabriel's entreaty, undertook to look into their affairs, and to give them the benefit of his opinion and advice, aided perhaps by more tangible and acceptable benefits.

Whatever may have been the extent of Mr. Hammond's exertions in favour of Lillian's sister and her husband, they were happily crowned with success; and he then proved himself so true and good a friend

to the reckless young couple, that they are both ready thankfully to acknowledge the advantages derived from the connection with the mercantile banker. They are also so far convinced of the wisdom of the precepts he inculcates, that they are now satisfied to live within the limits of their very liberal income for the present. No doubt a few years' will see all incumbrances happily removed ; and in the meantime there is a sense of comfort and independence at Stapleton Park that has long been wanting in their *ménage*.

It need hardly be said that Gabriel and Lillian are happy in the quiet home which is endeared to them by so many associations and blessings, past and present.

Michael has settled a liberal income on Gabriel and his wife, which enables them

to live there in ease and comfort, and affords every advantage to the young family that are rising up around them, and who promise to be all that the children of such parents ought to prove.

Michael takes a warm interest in his brother's children, and their constant presence in his old house has effectually chased the gloom from it, and enlivened even Mrs. Palmer's saddened existence with the reflection of their own bright cheerfulness.

Lillian's two daughters are like herself, with a promise of more than ordinary beauty. Of the three boys, the two youngest have already declared their juvenile predilection for the Army and Navy as their future destinations in life, and their uncle has promised to provide for both in whatever profession they may

eventually make choice of. But it is to the eldest, the little Wilfred of his earliest acquaintance, that Michael turns with a more than ordinary manifestation of interest and affection, and whom he has already proclaimed his heir.

Mr. Hammond makes no secret in his own family of his future intentions ; his brother Gabriel will inherit the family property, which, with his prospects in the bank as senior partner, will yield him a considerable income. But at his (Gabriel's) death, all will devolve (with the exception of certain moderate portions to the younger children) upon this young Wilfred Hammond, to whom, in the meantime, Michael has devised the whole bulk of his vast accumulations, to which he will succeed at his uncle's death.

This decision, which has also been made known to the boy himself, gives rise to many an anxious fear in the parents' hearts, lest he should thus early become entangled in the snare in which so many a soul has been caught and lost.

Michael Hammond is no longer a wealth-worshipper on his own account; but he still values his hoarded treasures, for the sake of him who is to succeed to all, and to whom he even now makes a more than ordinarily liberal allowance. The boy is happily of an open-hearted, generous disposition; and the peculiarly tender affection he always displays towards his mother seems to promise well for his future career.

Still Lillian will often whisper in trem-

bling of many a doubt and fear, as it rises in her heart, to that beloved husband who so truly shares her every thought and lightens every care. The mother's anxious cry is ever—

“I do so dread for Willie the love of money and money-making !”

For Wilfred is destined, in spite of his expectations from his uncle, to be a man of business as well as immense wealth. Gabriel then replies—

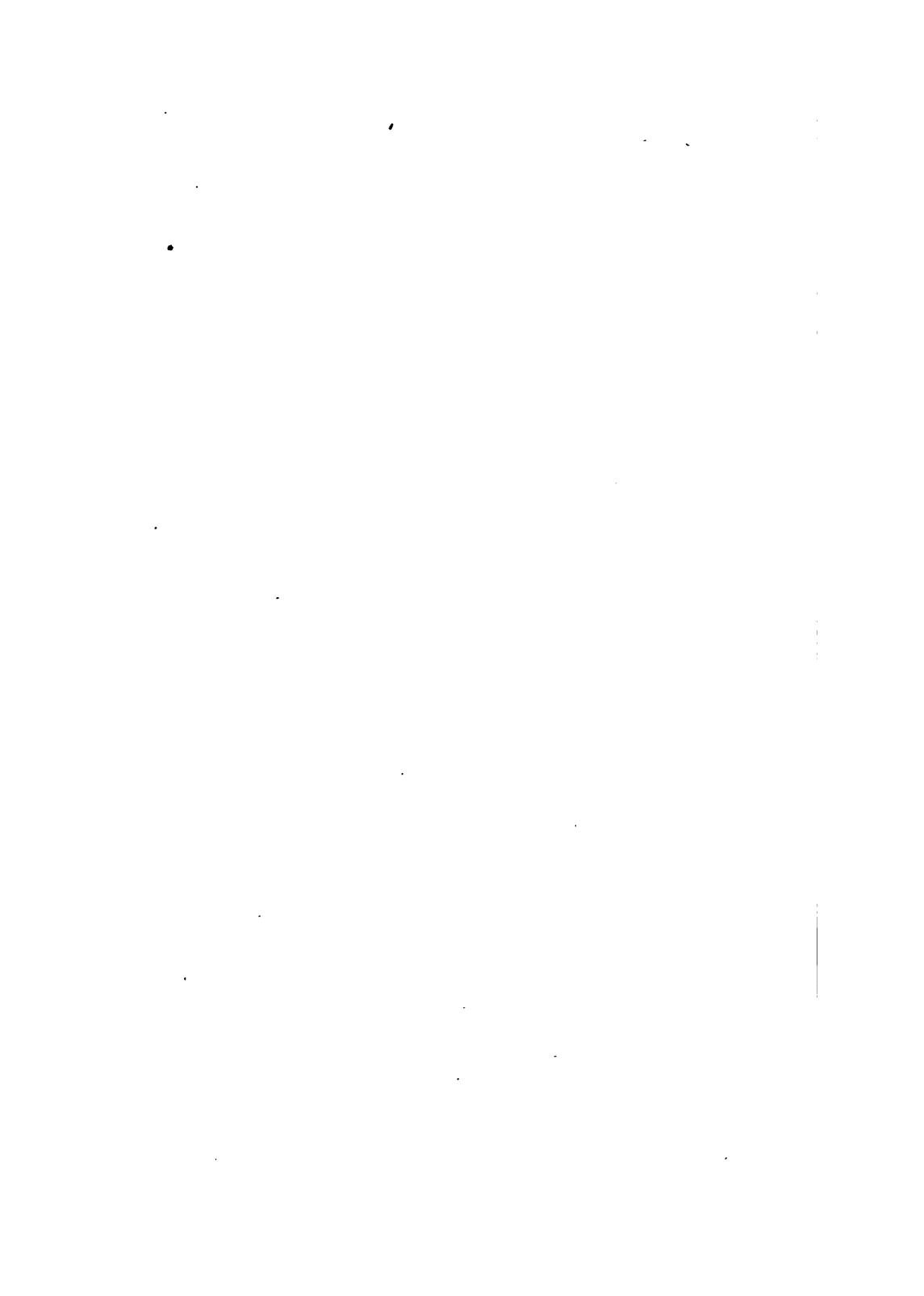
“Teach him then, dearest—and none can do it better than yourself—to look upon his future position and responsibilities in their true and proper light; so that when he enters upon them it may be with a humble spirit. Show him how to turn them into a blessing to himself and all around by a liberal and judicious *use* of

his wealth, and to avoid its *abuse*, either by squandering or hoarding; and, above all, teach him, if riches increase, not to set his heart upon them."

"Ah!" replies Lillian softly, "if, with God's blessing, he learns that lesson, I shall have no fears for him, even when he becomes the rich banker, and inherits all the wealth of

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THE END.



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